

自衛隊 ゲート

自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

1. 接触編

Illustration: 黒獅子
柳内たくみ
Yanai Takumi

下

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1. 接触編

下

鉄の天馬。鉄の象。

あんなものを大量に作り上げる
ジエイタイとはいったい何者なのか？
何故、こんな相手が攻めてきたのか？

ピニヤの愚問とも言える呟きに、
レイは嘯くように応じた。

「帝国は、
尾を踏んだ」
グリフオン
鷲獅子の







Chapter 13

A group of horsemen raced down the road to the west, heading for Italica.

Above them flew flags emblazoned with red, white and yellow roses. The sound of many galloping hooves thundered beneath them.

Their polished breastplates and helmets reflected gold and silver light, and the waving flags and upraised lances surged forward at great speeds.

The knight at their lead was particularly noteworthy.

She was a spectacularly-dressed female knight whose golden hair swayed in the wind. She lashed her horse repeatedly. Her mount mutely bore the pain and threw itself forward in response.

The countryside flew past the lady knight's eyes, but it was too slow, far too slow. She gripped the reins tighter, and lashed the horse harder.

“Bozes! You're going too fast!”

The woman whose voice was filled with even calmness caught up to the foremost rider.

She was a female knight with chestnut-brown hair. Behind her was a group of mounted warriors, whom she had left behind in her haste to catch up with Bozes.

The lady knight called Bozes replied in a voice like the tinkling of silver bells.

“We’re still too slow, Panache!”

“Your horse won’t be able to take it, and people in the rear can’t keep up with you. If this goes on, we won’t be able to fight even if we make it there on time.”

“It doesn’t matter, our objective is Italica, and the stragglers can catch up later. Time is of the essence now!”

“But—”

“Even if only a few people arrive in the end, there are ways to fight with small groups. The most important thing is to get there as soon as possible, even if it’s by just a little.”

Bozes had said this much, and Panache could not convince her otherwise. All she could do was follow behind Bozes and convince her to slow down as much as possible.

After Bozes forced herself to loosen the reins and lower her speed, the unit behind her finally managed to catch up a little.

“Panache, will we make it in time?”

“It’ll be fine. If it’s the Princess, she’ll think of a way.”

“But—”

It was all Bozes could do to suppress the uneasiness in her heart. Her energies were focused on the road which kept unfolding before her and the tiny point of Italica on the horizon.

Therefore, the first one to notice it was Panache.

“Hm?”

Something was approaching from in front of them.

Although this was supposed to be a major road of the Empire, that meant it had been built long ago and exposed to the elements in the wilderness, and in places it would become very narrow, certainly not big enough for two wagons to fit side by side. If the riders continued like this, they would collide with the people in front of them.

Speaking of which, the entity approaching from in front of them was drawing near with a speed that surpassed their expectations. It looked like a box, and from a distance they could not tell exactly what it was, but it seemed to be a wagon of some sort.

“Bozes!”

“I know.”

“The hell you know! Look ahead!”

As Panache’s scolding brought her around, Bozes straightened up, clicked her tongue and pulled back hard on the reins.

Panache raised her left hand to signal a halt to the rest of the unit behind her, and she pulled on her reins to stop her horse.

The people behind them were slightly relieved, because they had a chance to give their exhausted mounts a chance to rest. Both man and beast panted heavily, sweating rivers.

“Ahhh, what a pain! Have them make way!”

Just as the knights behind them were about to advance to remove the obstruction, they saw Panache’s signal to wait and stayed where they were.

“They came from Italica. I’ll check them out and see if they have any useful information.”

With that, Bozes slowly urged her horse forward.

“You did *what?!?*”

In her rage, Piña flung the silver goblet she was holding.

Bozes, who had proudly brought a prisoner of war with her in anticipation of a commendation, was completely taken aback by that reaction. She was stunned by Piña’s anger and the pain in her forehead, and it was only when she felt the warm wetness flowing down her face and saw blood on the finger she used to check it that she realized that she had a cut above her eyebrow.

The blood flowed down her beautiful cheek and dripped off her chin onto the carpet below, before slowly spreading out.

“Y-your Highness, why do you say that? What have we done wrong?”

Panache dabbed at Bozes’ wound while begging Piña for mercy. Bozes herself had collapsed on her rump in shock. Then, Hamilton reacted. Rather than shout angrily at them, she sighed deeply.

That evening

The knights had reached Italica at last. Bozes and Panache, relieved after seeing the peaceful streets, decided to report to Piña and apologize for not being able to make it to the battle. However, not only did Piña not blame them for that, but she even praised them for being earlier than expected.

Overjoyed from the praise, Bozes and Panache congratulated Piña on her victory and told her about their encounter with some foreigners who might have been the enemies who had taken over Arnus. They had captured one of them, and they thought Piña would have congratulated them on it, but once they brought him in front of Piña, she had struck them instead.

The two of them did not know why Piña had not only scolded them, but had even thrown a goblet at them.

“We broke the treaty in less than a day, and it just had to be *him*...”

Hamilton peeked at their prisoner, who was in the corner of the room.

Itami lay there, his body devoid of strength.

Hamilton placed a hand on his shoulder and shook him while shouting, “Itami-dono, Itami-dono”. But Itami was covered in abrasions and he sported many bruises from being beaten by many people, so his physical and mental stamina was depleted, to the point where he couldn’t even answer her.

It was not hard to imagine what had happened to him on the way back here from looking at him.

“Hamilton, how is Itami-dono?”

“It looks like he’s been hurt pretty badly, we need to get him care

immediately.

Piña summoned the chief maid of House Formal and said, “Sorry, we’ll leave him to you”. The old maid and butler replied, “Understood”, and then the maids came together to form a human wall around Itami. He was transported away in this manner.

After watching Itami leave, Piña fiercely snapped her head back.

She looked just like a demon then, and after slapping Bozes — who was a bit taller than her — square in the face, she began questioning her.

“What on earth did you lot do to Itami-dono?!”

“We, we just brought him here the way we would a normal prisoner...”

The normal way of treating prisoners, for the Empire, usually involved dragging them behind a horse, and when the prisoners collapsed from exhaustion, they would be poked with spears or lashed with the flat of a blade, forcing them to rise and continue. Even if they did stand, however, they would still be brutalized with fists and feet. In this way, the prisoners would lose the will and strength to resist or flee, and it was also part of the process of breaking them before selling them as slaves.

Piña muttered, “This is bad, this is really bad”. She grabbed her head with both hands and shuddered as she tried to suppress the rage running rampant through her body.

If one thought calmly about it, it was not entirely Bozes' or Panache's fault. After all, they had been handling an enemy who had taken over Arnus, and they could not possibly have known Piña had signed a treaty with them.

However, sometimes, unlikely things like this simply happened. The fact was that the JSDF had immediately withdrawn from Italica once the treaty took effect. Excuses like "they did not know" or "they were told too late" would not work. After all, the ones who wanted the treaty to take effect immediately had been Piña's side. Itami had been captured after the treaty took effect, and worse, it had happened within House Formal's domain, where they were guaranteed free passage.

These actions would break the treaty. There was no doubt about it.

This was a preferred tactic of the Empire, starting a war on the pretext of a treaty violation. Violations of treaties often happened in a world with poor communications like this one, with subordinate units fighting on long after the rest of them had surrendered because nobody told them to stop.

It was because the Empire did these things often that they felt the JSDF would do the same to them.

A chill ran down Piña's spine.

The music which rang across the sky and the Valkyries' sneer now echoed inside her ear. She could not help but imagine her knight band, Italica, even the whole Empire, burned to ashes by the flames of hell.

Bozes and Panache, who had learned about the agreement Piña signed with the JSDF from Hamilton, finally realized what they had done, what Itami had meant by “Let’s talk this out” and why he had not resisted his capture.

“Itami’s men should have been there, what happened to them?”

“The ran off just like that.”

They had laughed at Itami because Itami’s subordinates had run off instead of trying to rescue him. However, they now knew why they had chosen not to retaliate, but flee.

If they could have taken them all captive at the time, they could have wiped them all out under the pretext of the unit going missing, but if everyone else escaped, that would have been useless. Not that they could have captured them in the first place — they had Rory the Reaper with them.

“Your Excellency, we are fortunate that nobody’s life was lost here. Rather than try and come up with some clever ruse, I feel we should sincerely apologize to them.”

These were the words of Gray Co Aldo, who had been listening quietly from the side of the room.

“But these were the people who even asked us to treat these bandits ‘hyu-main-lee’, and they even asked us not to abuse them. If they found out what

happened to Itami, don't you think that would get them mad enough to attack us?"

"Then we just need to atone for that as well."

"That is, you want me to atone for that, right? But what if the other party asks us to hand over or execute the responsible parties?"

"Well, what else do you want to do? Declare war? These are opponents who ride iron pegasi and have magic that can set the earth ablaze, and then you have the Grim Reaper Rory Mercury to worry about. If it were me, I'd rather not chance that."

Even a hardened veteran like Gray was shaken to the core after seeing those horrible scenes. Piña was steeling herself to undergo any kind of humiliation as long as it would allow her to successfully atone for this.

That might be so, but, there was nobody present who was higher-ranked than her. Piña needed to avoid a situation where she might be forced to forfeit her life after Bozes and Panache admitted their guilt.

The air turned cold and heavy around them.

After a brief silence, Gray attempted to break the tension by saying in a humorous tone, "Well, in the end, the situation depends on what Itami-dono thinks about it."

In other words, he was telling all the women present to please Itami by any means possible.

There was a musical theater troupe called the Takarazuka Revue in Japan.

It featured an all-female cast who could sing and dance, in addition to putting on plays; and its founding dated back from before World War II. To Itami the Otaku, they were a world that was far removed from him, but recently they were performing “Rose of Versailles”, a play whose manga form Itami liked a lot, so he had considered going to watch them.

Come to think of it, the knight band they encountered on the way back to Arnus from Italica had reminded him of an outdoor performance of the Takarazuka Revue.

Everyone he saw with his amazed eyes were women, and all of them were beautiful, graceful, cute and charming young girls.

Even if there were some men hiding within their number, after seeing that the first half of these ravishing beauties were wearing men’s clothes, he might have assumed that everyone in the back was a woman too.

Then there were their ornately detailed flags, weapons and armor, the decadently decorated horse barding that gleamed in the sun, and the uniforms made from cloth of gold and silver, all of which might make one think of a

romance manga set in the high society of the 18th century French court.

The woman who raised her hand to signal a halt urged her horse forward.

She was mounted on a white horse, and she had a head of chestnut-colored hair. Her silver-colored breastplate was decorated by a white tabard stitched with silver thread, and she wore a white cape. She had a cavalry saber by her side, a slender sword whose hilt and guard were covered with elaborate flower-themed decorate, and of course its blade boasted an immaculate sheen.

Her eyes were cold and sharp, with a hint of trying to look cool. She gave off an air of a female actress trying her best to play a male role, and if a high school girl who liked this sort of thing saw her, she might squeal in delight.

Kurata sat there with a goofy expression on his face and said, “This is the first time I’ve seen drill hair IRL.”

He was looking behind the lady in white, at the woman who seemed hostile. She rode a black horse, and her luxurious golden ringlets descended to her waist. So, this was the legendary drill hair. Was there some sort of special ability associated with it? He could not help but wonder about that as he saw the huge ribbon on her head.

At a glance, she was a beautiful woman who held herself like a daughter of nobility, and the way she looked down imperiously on them (The fact that she was mounted and thus had to look down on them only added to the effect)

seemed to say, “Kneel and lick my toes, you pig bastard”. If she actually said that, he might have simply answered “Yes, ma’am” and gotten to it.

Itami turned his attention from the female knights to the rose-emblem flags, and mentally named the chestnut-haired woman the “white rose”, and the high-class blonde the “yellow rose”.

Kuwabara contacted the rest of the team over the wireless, and they gripped their rifles tightly as they went on alert. Sensing this, Itami immediately ordered them to hold fire in order to avoid breaking the treaty. At this moment, Rory and Lelei were dozing in the back because they had been up all night.

Of the three vehicles in 3rd Recon’s convoy, the one at the head was the Type 73 truck, the second was the HMT, and the third was the LAV. The female knights approached the Type 73.

The white rose spurred her horse toward Tomita before speaking.

Staff Sergeant Tomita, age 27, Ranger trained. He was a person who could only communicate with this world through the use of a phrasebook, and poorly at that. Under these circumstances, he could only respond to the white rose’s question with frantic body language and frequent references to his phrasebook.

Said the white rose: “Where are you from?”

Replied Tomita: “We are, from Italica go out.”

Due to the language barrier, he had to try and assemble the sentence from individual words in the phrasebook, and then speak slowly and carefully so the white rose could understand. On her part, the yellow rose treated the tongue-tied Tomita as an idiot and turned up her nose at him.

The white rose asked: “Where are you going?”

Tomita flipped through his notebook and replied: “Arnus Hill.”

As she heard this, the white rose shouted in panic, “You said WHAT?!”

Only an enemy would want to go to a place taken over by foreign enemies.

In addition, they had carriages that could move without being pulled by horses, and they carried unfamiliar weapons. The knights had held their doubts ever since they saw these people.

The female knights bristled with hostility as they heard his reply. “What? Enemies!” they shouted, and then their lances, originally held upright, were levelled straight at Itami’s team.

The riders swiftly assumed their formation, which spoke of their excellent drilling, and Itami realized they were nothing like a theater troupe, but a professionally trained military group. The reason why they had lined their horses up went without saying.

As they saw this, Itami's men immediately assumed firing positions with their rifles, and Sasagawa swivelled the LAV heavy machine gun over to point at them, with a deep clanking of metal from the pintle mount.

The yellow rose alighted, a cold expression on her face, and she drew close to Tomita before grabbing him by the labels and telling him in a threatening tone to "Repeat yourself".

In order to make sure this foreigner had not misspoken, she asked him again, "Where did you come from, and where are you going?"

It was hard for Tomita to breathe with the yellow rose grabbing his collar, and while he blushed for a completely unrelated reason, he forced out "Italica come Arnus go"

Itami could not bear to see Tomita suffering, so he told Kuwabara, "Pops, we cannot be the ones to make the first move under any circumstances" before leaving his rifle, handgun and bayonet on his vehicle.

Then, he called out to the white rose and the yellow rose in the local language.

"About that, I'm sorry, did my subordinate offend you?"

However, the hysterical woman was stirred into a rage by the relaxed tone of those words.

Itami suddenly felt them staring at him like he was some sort of criminal, and he nonchalantly said, “Calm down, let’s talk about this.”

However, the female knight was no longer listening to him.

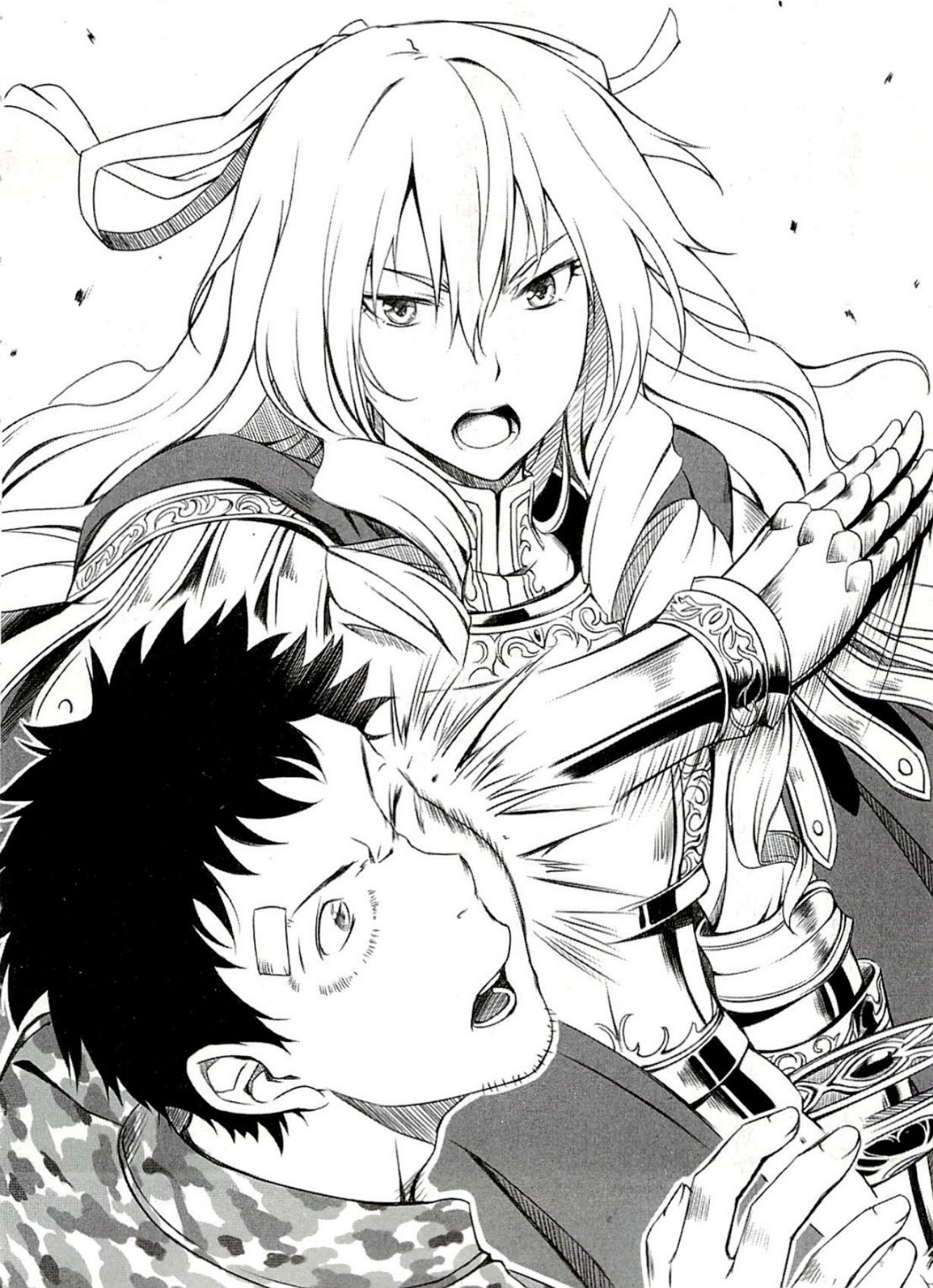
This was the first time she had ever been deployed in her life and she was wound up enough that she had no energy left to spare on thought. And right now, the veteran officers and NCOs that were so desperately needed to maintain order here were somewhere far away instead.

Not to mention, the lack of fluency with the language made the knights suspicious, because there was no way to tell if they were safe or threatening. Their suspicion toward the people in front of them grew by leaps and bounds. And when their suspicion reached a certain level, it was only natural that it would result in them drawing their weapons. Panache, the white rose, pointed her sword at Itami who appeared to be completely unconcerned and ordered him to surrender.

They would not feel safe until they rounded up and disarmed this mysterious group of people.

They had no idea why the enemy would show up here, but they did not dare take chances. At least, despite some weird movements among them, they had not launched an attack yet. And just as the tension was rising ever higher, a man saying “Let’s talk” kept trying to cut in.

“Hey, you, shut up!” the yellow rose snapped as she slapped Itami.



The JSDF were filled with murderous intent as they saw this, but Kuwabara stopped them by shouting “Wait!” and Itami added, “Now! Run away! Run away now!”

And so, with the roar of their engines causing the knights’ horses to panic, 3rd Recon fell back, tires squealing. Because it had happened so fast, the effort which the knights put into calming their startled horses was wasted, because the JSDF vehicles had long since vanished in a puff of smoke.

Several knights spurred their horses to try and chase them, but they could not catch up at all. Meanwhile, Itami had been left alone in the midst of the enemy.

“Ow, ow, ow...”

His head hurt, his back hurt, his legs hurt, his right eye hurt, in fact, most of his body hurt.

After regaining consciousness, he painfully forced his eyes open to see nothing but darkness.

Was it night-time, or had he just been locked up in a dark room... either way it was pretty dark.

However, what made him nervous was the sensation of a soft down blanket on him, which was so comfortable it filled him with foreboding instead. He looked around to try and see where he was. His head still hurt, but he tried to prop himself up on his shoulders.

And then, a pair of soft hands stopped him from rising.

This pair of hands gently pressed him down onto the bed and covered him up.

After that, someone brought a candle over, and the warm light illuminated Itami's surroundings.

The faces of smiling maids appeared in the candlelight. "Are you awake, Master?"

"What, where, where, where is this?"

The Japanese he had spoken by reflex seemed to have confused them. Itami did not recall going to an Akihabara maid cafe or maid hotel.

"Where is this place?" he asked after he managed to get himself under control.

"This is Formal Manor."

Itami nodded, as if to say "I see", and began trying to make sense of the circumstances.

A quick look around suggested he was not in a jail or dungeon or something similar.

Itami mused that since he had been dragged back to Italica, it made sense that this should be Italica, not to mention the people taking care of him seemed to be House Formal's maids.

After seeing the improvement in his current conditions, he realised that Piña did not intend to break the treaty. In other words, it seemed Itami had a chance to be released safely, so there was no need to push himself to escape from here.

“Then, could you get me a glass of water?”

The maid smiled and said, “Understood” before bowing and stepping outside the room. Replacing her was a tall maid wearing pince-nez glasses. She knelt beside Itami's bed to look at him.

Itami looked at the maid's face, blinked, and looked again.

“Is there something on my face ~nya?”

“No-no, no, it's fine.” In his heart, he reflected that a world like this ought to have things like this, and forced himself to accept it.

What Itami had seen was a pair of cat ears on the bespectacled maid. Given that they even moved by themselves, they were probably not fakes worn as

accessories.

“May I ask what is going on?”

“Nya?”

“Er, no... I mean, what’s the state of the town, of the manor? Or maybe how I got here?”

The cat-eared maid froze, a troubled expression on her face.

However, the chief maid who had appeared beside her said, “It is now past midnight, and many of the people in the town are asleep. The town is at rest.”

The chief maid must have been trying to say that peace had returned to Italica. She also mentioned that they would have a memorial service to mourn those who had fallen in the town’s defense. However, she was not sure how much damage had been done to the villages outside the town, and she did not know how long the domain of House Formal would take to recover from this. It might be a long time.

Piña’s knight band had trickled into Italica, mainly infantry and cavalry who could not catch up. Now that over 80% of them were gathered, Piña had ordered them to patrol the interior of House Formal’s domain and secure it.

“And so, Lady Piña ordered us to treat Itami-dono kindly, and she has punished the knight leaders who treated you with disrespect.”

The white and yellow knight leaders had felt Piña's wrath, which for Bozes (whom Itami knew as the yellow rose) had taken the form of a thrown silver goblet that had left a deep cut. It might even have left a scar behind, which was why Bozes had the entire knight band's sympathies.

After that extremely detailed explanation, the chief maid bowed deeply to Itami.

"We are very grateful for your aid in saving this town."

The other five or six maids bowed deeply as well, and Itami realised that they didn't just have cat-ears among them, but bunny-ears too.

"We, the staff of House Formal, as well as the people of this town, are deeply grateful to Itami-sama and his men for saving Italica. Regarding the injuries done to Itami-sama, we pray that he will let the matter go with his kind and noble heart. If Itami-sama wishes to vent his anger by destroying this town in retribution, please know that we will all gladly aid you in doing so. We ask only that Itami-sama spare Countess Myui, the heir to House Formal."

After saying that, they bowed deeply again, letting Itami know all the fears and worries in their hearts. Itami realised that they were loyal to neither the princess nor the Empire itself. These maids were loyal only to their liege lady Myui, and if they decided that Piña's existence no longer benefited Myui, there would be half a dozen knives in the Princess' back. Itami sensed that the same might apply to him as well.

The chief maid and the other maids had lowered their heads to him for House Formal's benefit. Anyone who could act incautiously around them after knowing their motive must be the most clueless lecher in the world.

Because he could not drink water while lying down, Itami decided to sit himself up. The cat-eared maid in glasses helped him up, which he was glad to receive because his entire body was sore from his injuries.

"Itami-sama. These girls are Mome, Aurea, Persia and Mamina. From now on, the four of them will be your personal attendants. Please feel free to ask them for anything you need."

The girl who poured the water was human. Then there was the girl with the glasses and the cat ears. Then there was the bunny-eared maid. And then there was one who looked like a human, but her red hair was a mass of writhing snakes. The four of them knelt before Itami with their heads lowered.

"Please ask us for anything you need, my master."

Itami had no idea how to answer the cute girls and beautiful ladies who were saying this to him. Even if the logical part of him knew that doing anything ungentlemanly to them was dangerous, Itami had to forcibly suppress the thought "Maybe it would be okay to fool around with them a little", which came from the bottom of his heart.

A little bit earlier, on the outskirts of Italica at evening

Outside Italica, the members of 3rd Recon, minus their commander, lay prone on the ground to conceal themselves as they waited for dusk to fall.

“You think he’s dead?”

Kuribayashi said that as she observed the town through her binoculars. They had watched Itami being dragged around and beaten by the knights after they captured him, so her words were unconsciously phrased as a wish.

Kuribayashi Shino had a little known habit — when she encountered people of the otaku persuasion, she would instinctively react with “Die, otaku scum!” She would point her rifle at Itami’s head from behind in order to save him. However, since she was the sort of person who said things without thinking about them, Itami called her the “brainless titty monster”.

Understanding her personality, Staff Sergeant Tomita replied, “He wouldn’t die from just that much, right?”

Tomita was already in camouflage.

Waiting along with them were Lelei, Tuka and Rory, who had camouflage paint on their cheeks, the tips of their noses, their foreheads, and other places which would easily reflect light. Kuribayashi had applied it for them

personally. However, since they did not have enough camouflage uniforms, they remained in their usual clothes.

“I mean, he’s a Ranger, that ought to count for something?”

“Who’s the Ranger?”

“Who else but Lieutenant Itami?”

“What? That’s bullshit, right?”

“No, no, it’s the truth.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s the truth.”

“No way~ It’s impossible~ give me a break~”

Kuribayashi, who had long coveted the Ranger badge, felt her dream becoming tainted in that instant.

Rory and Tuka did not understand Japanese too well and were quite confused, while Lelei, who was more familiar with the language, had no idea what those words meant. To satisfy her curiosity, she asked Kuribayashi why it was impossible for Itami to be a “Rain Jar”.

The tormented Kuribayashi smiled bitterly and said, “Itami doesn’t fit the image of a Ranger at all!” Rangers had wills as strong as steel, could endure any sort of hardship to complete a mission, and so on. At least, that was how Kuribayashi described her idealized image of her ranger, exaggerating their greatness by at least 240% in the process.

Even Lelei, who had a calm and levelheaded personality, could not help herself smiling.

After all, everyone’s impression of Itami’s spirit was that it was as soft as a slime (however, it was so soft that it couldn’t be broken), and he was the sort of person who would run away from difficult tasks, while finding a way to muddle through any tasks given him. Some might call him “easygoing”, while the less polite would describe him as a “slacker” instead.

Of course, Lelei knew that 3rd Recon had not only saved the people of Coda Village, driven off the Flame Dragon, helped the refugees settle down in the Arnus Living Community and defeated the bandits ravaging Italica, but she had also seen these things with her own eyes. However, these things were not the personal effort of Itami, but the result of 3rd Recon working together, as well as due to other combat elements of the JSDF.

When Lelei translated for Rory and Tuka, they laughed too. Kuribayashi’s idea of mental strength described Kuwabara and Tomita well, and maybe Kuribayashi herself, but it seemed completely incompatible with Itami, who spent his time reading books (usually manga).

On many occasions, they had spotted him stringing up a hammock under a tree and napping, or flipping through a thin softcover book (rare doujins, only available at Comiket), in Arnus forest or near the refugee camp.

“That’s enough, isn’t it about time?”

Tomita rose from the ground as he said that.

The sun had set during their entertaining discussion, and the veil of night now cloaked their surroundings. It was the best time to move out.

Kuribayashi muttered to herself.

“Staying up this late is bad for my skin...”

That said, after last night’s wild melee and exercise, her skin was practically glowing with satisfaction. She and Rory might be the only two in the group who felt that way.

And so, after last night’s intense combat, tonight they would be conducting an infiltration.

Well, it should have been an infiltration, but Italica’s defenses had grown lax to the point where even a monkey could just waltz right in.

The local guards were too exhausted from combat to keep their guard up.

In addition to that, those obnoxious noble ladies from the knight band had shown up and demanded, “You, show me around.” “Hey, where’s the barracks?” and so on in a bossy way. It was a pain taking their horses to the stables or making sure they were fed and watered. After that, a whole bunch of troops they had never seen before showed up, and they made things worse by treating the locals like a bunch of idiots.

And of course, since the local guards and townspeople had never seen the people from the knight band before, nobody would notice one or two more unfamiliar faces.

In this way, Rory, Tuka and Lelei proudly walked into Italica through the front door and successfully “infiltrated” the city. Even if they were spotted by the sentries, they would only think “Eh, why did they come back?” and so on.

“Well, if it was going to be like this, we wouldn’t even have needed to put on the camouflage...”

As she grumbled, Tuka called on the spirits of sleep to visit the guards watching the wall, putting them out until dawn.

After that, they signalled to Kuribayashi, Tomita, Kurata and Katsumoto, who were waiting outside the town. The four of them poked their heads up one after the other.

Silence reigned in Italica, and nobody noticed Tomita and the others moving around. In this way, they easily made their way to Formal Manor.

Although there were alert sentries here, nobody noticed Tomita and gang.

After all, the sentries did not have night vision equipment and could not spot anyone hiding in the darkness. As such, everyone waited until the patrolling guards passed and quietly advanced, using the tall grass for cover.

Eventually, they reached the side of a building, and Tomita found a window (these were spaced evenly along the exterior of the building). He broke it down and entered.

“Please ask us for anything you need, my master.”

A pair of bunny ears suddenly erected among the four heads which lowered themselves.

The way they had stood up resembled a wary rabbit, and barely a moment later, a pair of cat ears twitched and stood up.

“Mamina, what’s wrong?”

The old chief maid directed a cold look to the bunnygirl called Mamina.

“I heard the sound of wood breaking downstairs. We might have an intruder in the manor.”

Although she was a maid with bunny ears, she was radiating the aura of a vicious killer. The cat-eared maid seemed less like an adorable housepet than a prowling leopard.

“Nobody in the town would dare intrude on the manor, and Piña’s men would come in through the front door. Since the bandits have been exterminated, it should be Itami-sama’s men.”

The chief maid spoke thus: “Persia, Mamina, the two of you will lead Itami-sama’s men here.”

“What if they aren’t Itami-sama’s men?”

“Then deal with them as usual.”

“Understood.”

The cat-eared girl and the bunny-eared girl stood up. Their dextrous movements would make one think of wild carnivores as they silently left the room.

This piqued Itami’s otaku curiosity, and he asked the chief maid a question.

“Are those two who just left maids here? What species are they?”

“Mamina is a Warrior Bunny, and Persia is one of the Catpeople. Aurea here

is a Medusa, and Mome is a normal human.”

“Uwah, that’s a lot of species. Is it normal to have so many together in one place?”

“No, actually it is quite rare. The previous Count Formal was an open-minded gentleman. He felt that pointless friction between the species would only bring difficulty to all of them, so he set out to employ as many demihumans as possible. Then again, it could have just been his personal interests at work.”

“The previous Count seems like a man after my own heart.”

“Well, Itami-sama does have the same feeling as the previous Count~”

Aurea reached her wriggly red hair out to Itami, but it was smacked aside by Mamo with a solid “Thwap!”

“Ow, ow, ow~”

“Don’t do rude things to the master.”

“Okie...”

Aurea had a pitiful look on her face, like a cat whose food had been snatched away. Although she looked cute and adorable, the chief maid stressed repeatedly that Medusas fed on spirit energy, so her hair would absorb the

energy of others. Even though she had been trained to control herself, sometimes she would lose out to her instincts, so Itami would need to take care around her.

After a while, the door opened.

Persia and Mamina entered, followed by Kuribayashi, Tomita, Kurata, Katsumoto, Rory, Lelei and Tuka, one after the other.

As she saw Rory's face, the chief maid and the other maids went "Oh! To think your Holiness would personally come here!" and gathered around her.

In the face of the pious devotees kneeling before her and asking for her blessing, Rory looked at them with a kind expression and quietly held out her palm to them. It seemed as though a divine light was radiating from her hand, and the faithful were bathing blissfully in it.

Speaking of which, since Emroy was the god of death, judgement, madness and war, Itami could not help but think anyone devoted to him would be bad news. After all, there had been cults who used Sarin gas to murder people, and there were a bunch of crazy people who believed in them. However, the worshippers of Emroy might be worse than those cultists.

And the one who ruined the atmosphere was Kurata, who quietly sidled up to Itami's bed and whispered, "Well, looks like you lucked out, Lieutenant..."

Itami knew Kurata was mad about moe monster girls, so he slyly grinned,

“Oh? Jealous, are we?” Although Itami wasn’t a huge fan of monster girls or maids, someone who did like them would probably be in heaven.

“I’ll introduce you to them later,” Itami whispered.

Chapter 14

It was already past midnight. Yet Piña was not in bed, but deep in thought in her office.

There was no way she could sleep if the situation continued to deteriorate like this.

She had not yet decided how to deal with her failures or foolishness, so she could not relax. Frustration and worry tore at her heart as she agonized over what she should do next.

The room that Piña used for her office was once the previous Count Formal's study. The furniture was high quality, featuring items like a heavy, polished desk, a comfortable chair, and the room itself was filled with the fragrance of parchment and ink.

Were these all relics of the previous Count? Things like monocles made from insect chitin, quill pens, a bell to summon the maids, all of these were proudly displayed on the desk. There was a thick stack of tax collection reports on one side of the table, as well as records for land management and tax records, and yes, come to think of it, she still had to send for a good man to help manage the Formal estate. All these were problems Piña was thinking of resolving.

She wagged the quill pen, scrawling several bright ideas on the parchment, crossing them out, writing more ideas down and then cancelling them again.

Underlined on the parchment was: “Is there a way to avoid breaking the treaty?”

However, all of Itami’s men had escaped.

If they did not get completely wiped out between here and Arnus, they would definitely return to base and make a report. There was no reason for them not to.

If she wanted to stop them from making their report, she would have to catch them or kill them.

Question: if she sent pursuers after them, could she capture them?

Answer: No.

With her current battle strength, could she stop these people, who drove off a Flame Dragon?

When she saw how they had abandoned their own leader and run off, they seemed like honorless cowards. But in truth, they clearly had the power to annihilate Piña’s knights in seconds, so she had no idea why they would act so weak. What worried Piña was the suspicion that there was some other reason for it. Paranoia began filling her mind as she began wondering what other schemes her hidden enemies might have in mind for her.

She had drawn Bozes' and Panache's faces on the parchment, with "stupid", "moron" and other such words beside them. In the end, she gripped the parchment tight and tried to think.

She now knew that there was no way to avoid the treaty violation becoming public knowledge. Time only flowed one way, and the more she thought about it, the more hopeless it seemed.

Yet the Princess grabbed her head and muttered, "Don't give up, don't give up".

Piña considered something else. She would not stress herself over an impossible question like this. Instead she would consider how to make up for her previous mistakes and reduce the impact on her side.

War was simply a continuation of diplomacy, and diplomacy was like a game of cards. If one wanted to clash with an opponent with strong cards, there were three strategies. Avoid having one's opponent play his strong cards, induce him to waste his strong cards, or gain strong cards of one's own.

However, these strategies were useless if one did not understand one's opponent, since one could not counter what one knew nothing about. All she could do was keep her opponent from gaining even more strong cards.

We have two strikes against us. First, we guaranteed the free movement of the Jayesdeef, but we attacked them. Second, we captured Itami, and we did not treat him hyu-main-ly.

For the first, like Aldo said, a good idea would be to apologize as quickly as possible. No, that might actually be the best move we could make in that case.

For the second, the Jayesdeef preaches hyu-many-tearian treatment of their opponents, and they might even be considered the “good guys”, for a given value of “good”. If we honestly explain that it was a communications error, they might treat us kindly. In the best case, we might not lose anything at all.

However, apologies and atonement would be giving the other side a valuable opening to exploit. For example, the idea that they might ask for compensation or other things was the source of Piña’s worries and unease. There would be no way they could refuse any demands made by the JSDF who had such overwhelming fighting power and destructive ability.

Piña was willing to negotiate with the JSDF because she had seen their power with her own eyes.

However, Piña’s authority limited her to being an intermediary. Could the Empire’s diplomats understand the terror of these opponents? Would the Emperor and his advisors understand?

Piña was beginning to discover that right now, she alone in the whole Empire knew what they were up against.

In the past, Piña believed that the Empire’s hard-line, imperialistic negotiation policy, paired with the threat of their military power, was a

reliable strategy. The young diplomats would skilfully debate their counterparts and produce a long list of demands the enemy could not refuse, and in the end they would force the enemy to bend the knee. These scenes had filled her heart with joy.

But if they tried these tactics on the Jayesdeef...

“My stomach hurts again...”

Piña took out a new sheet of parchment and began a report to her father, Emperor Molt. She wrote that the enemy possessed unprecedented power and fearsome fighting ability, and described everything that she had seen and heard about them. However, halfway through, Piña could not continue writing, and in the end she ended up scratching random lines through the report, even breaking her quill’s nib in the process.

“Who would take this fairytale seriously? Not even an idiot would believe it!”

After all, even she could hardly believe what she was writing.

She would worry about the report later. For now, she just wanted to discuss their plans for the future with Hamilton.

“To begin with, we need to decide how to deal with Itami.”

Currently, Itami was sleeping within this manor.

If he's willing to play dumb and keep quiet, we can cut our losses. No, if it works, we might end up having an ace in the hole instead.

The question then was how to persuade Itami to shut up. What could they bribe him with? Or perhaps they could use the fact that he was a man to seduce him? Or perhaps, both at once?

But then, there was another question — who would she charge with that task?

Of course, she had considered handling that part herself. However, Itami was merely a minor commander of about ten men. Even if he led a special forces unit, in the Empire he would be a centurion at best. A lowly commander like him was certainly not worth her body. The gift of an Imperial Princess would be reserved for a higher-ranked person.

Then, who should go?

Hamilton might be suitable for the task. She had experience with men, and should be skilled with them. However, she was an important consultant for Piña, and if the needed time for interaction dragged on too long, it would be too late to regret her choice. So Hamilton was out.

As she thought further, the names of Bozes and Panache appeared in her mind.

Since they had created this mess in the first place, it was only fitting that they

take care of it.

More to the point, the two of them were very suited to this sort of work. As for why that was the case, it was obviously because of their looks. Bozes' hair looked like it had been spun from pure gold, and she was a highborn daughter of Marquis Palesti.

Panache was the daughter of Baron Kalgi, and though she was not of higher social rank than Bozes, she had fearsome eyes, and the combination of her presence and looks was unbeatable. If she used the two of them as a honeytrap, no man on earth should be able to resist them.

Although it was a waste to use them on a small fry like Itami, when she considered the severity of the situation, a lineup like this was necessary.

Piña decided not to worry about the final question — whether the two of them had the necessary personality for such a task. She had already decided it was a perfect plan and was determined to carry it out. In any case, deciding to give the necessary orders made her feel a little safer.

And so, Piña rang the bell on the desk.

To calm herself, she sipped some of the fragrant tea. In that moment, the candles flickered in a small breeze.

A maid suddenly appeared from somewhere outside of Piña's field of vision, lifting her skirt with both hands in order to curtsy with a slight flexing of her

knees. Piña accepted the gesture of respect with a regal nod.

“Your Excellency, what do you wish of this one?”

“Mm, go bring Bozes and Panache over.”

“But they are sleeping, milady.”

“Never mind. Wake them up.

“Then I will go now.”

The maid left the study with those words, and Piña rose from her seat. While she waited for them to show up, she tidied up the desk. In particular, she tore up the piece of parchment which contained less than flattering remarks about Panache and Bozes.

Springtime had finally arrived for Kurata.

A high elf girl, a quiet, expressionless magical girl, and a mature dark priestess onee-san in a Loli's body... why is it all the girls we've met in the Special Region are Itami's type? GM, I want to reroll this dungeon! All the grumbling and grudges he had been holding in his heart until now were dispersed in a single moment.

After all, the kind of girl he liked had finally showed up. No matter how one

looked at it, Kurata was having trouble completely suppressing the excitement in his heart — no, he had a goofy grin plastered all over his face. However, he was afraid that giving in to his desires and pushing people down might lead to terrible consequences, so he forced himself to keep quiet.

In particular, it was Persia, the cat-eared glasses-wearing maid, who captured his attention.

She was not a cute little Loli catgirl, but more like an onee-san type panther or lioness.

She wore pince-nez glasses, but even they and her two feline eyes could not hide the cool image she gave off, and there was a special kind of feeling about her mature, sensual proportions which looked like they could barely fit into her maid uniform.

And unlike in the Akihabara maid cafes or pachinko parlors, she was different from the usual exhibitionist cosplay attendants. She did not wear one of those heretical maid outfits which lewdly displayed her body, but a proper set of work clothes. These tightly-fitted orthodox maid clothes dripped with the true essence of maidness.

As he watched his ideal catgirl maid take care of Itami, Kurata could not help but grumble, “Ahhhh, I’m so damn jealous, you lucky bastard, hurry up and introduce me to her or I’ll put a cap in your ass! (It should be noted that shooting one’s allies in their buttocks is not recommended.)”

Itami grinned as he heard Kurata, and decided to throw him a bone. “Hey, Kurata, this young lady here is Persia-san. Persia-san, this is my subordinate, Kurata. I hope you’ll get along.”

That introduction was a starter’s pistol for Kurata, and he immediately ran his mouth off.

“M-my name is Kurata Takeo! Pleased to meet you!” followed by his nervous salute. However, his antics earned a curious “Nya?” from her, followed by a smile.

This was the first time Persia had seen a male expressing such pure admiration for her.

As a female Cat-person, Persia was proud of her looks. She was not an adorable kitty cat, but more like a mature leopardess, and she embraced her feminine nature as a source of appeal. In the past, there had been many men who looked at her with lewd eyes filled with desire, and just as many men who sensed her bestial nature and backed away in fear.

However, Kurata was different from them.

A female author once wrote, “Cats and women have an instinct for whether men have good intentions about them.” Persia, being a feline and a female at the same time, perfectly illustrated this point, and naturally, she could sense Kurata’s true feelings.

Granted, his intentions were not entirely pure, but this was the first time she had ever encountered intense feelings like his which burned like a bonfire, and it moved her. And so, the two of them hit it off pretty well, and there was good chemistry brewing between them.

Much like Kurata and Persia were doing, the other maids of House Formal were getting along well with the JSDF troopers.

Though this was in the middle of the night, Formal Manor was still a noble home. Visitors to a noble home had to be entertained, therefore the maids brought out tea and light snacks for their uninvited guests. While the JSDF troopers were technically intruders, it hardly seemed that way from how they were chatting with the maids.

The martially-inclined Kuribayashi seemed to have found a kindred spirit in Mamina, the Warrior Bunny. Much like how the protagonists of manly action movies had a mutual admiration for each other, Mamina had seen Kuribayashi's moves during the previous night's battle and she admired her for them.

Lelei, on the other hand, was interested in Aurea the Medusa, so she drew close to carefully inspect her, even going so far as to touch the writhing tentacle-like strands of Aurea's snake-hair. Lelei gasped in awe. Throughout history, Medusas were persecuted by humanity because of their unfortunate habits, and they were an endangered species in this world. This was the first time Lelei had ever encountered a Medusa outside of her history books.

Rory, on the other hand, was stuck dealing with the chief maid, who was a faithful follower of Emroy. Rory felt that she couldn't just brush the chief maid off after seeing her earnest response, so she had to explain Emroy's message to her.

Mome the human maid was glued to Tuka, pestering her with questions about the jeans and the trendy T-shirt she was wearing, asking things like where she could buy them and so on. Tuka could only answer within her knowledge, which was largely limited to how it felt and so on. The maids were awed and rendered speechless by the stretchy, yet comfortable material. Tuka smiled bitterly and commented that wearing clothes like these which showed off her body made her a little uncomfortable at times.

On his part, Itami briefed Tomita and Katsumoto about the current situation before discussing their future plans. After they realised that the situation was not critical, they concluded that there was no need to force an escape.

At this point in time, Bozes, under Piña's secret orders, had arrived at Itami's door, with a pained expression on her face. However, nobody heard her knocking.

Because Bozes was nervous, her knocking could be more accurately compared to gently caressing the door.

She waited dumbly in the dark corridor for some kind of reaction.

She continued waiting, in front of the silent, unresponsive door.

As she waited, she began to get worried about a passer-by spotting her, so she looked left and right, before taking a deep breath and exhaling to relieve her tension. Even then, she still could not gather up the courage to open the door.

“You will seduce Itami.” To Bozes, that order might as well have been a death sentence.

As a noble daughter, she had long been prepared for the eventuality that someday, she would be married off to benefit her family or for political reasons.

She was familiar with the idea that as a noble daughter, she might be called on to welcome guests and ensnare them with her body.

She was also very clear about how countless heiresses throughout the Empire had to marry people who were completely unlike the knights in shining armor that they dreamed of. No matter how luxuriously they lived after that, it was just a pretty way of describing a form of transaction. In truth, since there were people who had to starve and freeze in this world, this could be considered the purpose, or perhaps, their duty, for those who could fill their bellies and dress well.

But the most insulting thing was that she was going to have to give herself to Itami.

In her dreams, Bozes imagined that she would greet a duke, who was also a young officer of an enemy nation while dressed in an elegant sarong, and enjoy an exciting, intellectual debate with him for the pleasure of verbally fencing with an equal.

Armed with her greatest weapons (her jewels), clad in her strongest armor (her dress) and wreathed in fragrant perfume, she would play love games with him.

She would tempt him with her luscious body and dull his mind with her scent, her every movement saying “Do you want me? Do you want to have me? I can give my body to you, but if you want it, you’re going to have to give yourself to me...” and so on, teasing him and drawing him out until her partner surrendered completely to her, and then they would make sweet love to each other on a bed of roses.

But her dreams were just dreams, and the reality was that Itami’s bed would be her battlefield. They would not bond over the clash of blades, they would not even be able to develop feelings for each other, and she had already berated him with her tongue before stepping on and kicking him. She had gone into shock when she learned the truth.

And if this was a battle, then it was no longer on even terms. After all, her body was practically exposed to him already. She had applied a thick layer of powder to cover up the cut on her forehead, garbed herself in a revealing nightgown that she had gotten from somewhere and her hair was a mess of

drills. In this tragic state, she was little more than the hourly discount at a brothel's going-out-of-business sale.

Be it physically or emotionally, she was already defeated. What kind of face would she greet Itami with? Maybe, after she entered the room, she should beg him for forgiveness and offer her body to him as a token of her sincerity.

Men were not creatures who would honor a plea like "Could you be gentle?" after you got into bed with them. If she did not manage to at least secure his kindness as a promise before she gave herself to him, it was not likely that he would listen to her once he was having his way with her. Then, what was she selling herself in such haste for?

She guessed that the task of actually bringing down Itami the boss character would be left to Panache, who would be coming after her. Bozes was nothing more than an appetizer to apologize and beg his forgiveness, sacrificing herself to cancel out the terrible mistake she had made. Like a washcloth used to wipe away stains, whether it was fine silk or tatty rags, she would be used and promptly discarded.

As she thought about this, her heart ached so much that she wanted to cry. But she could not cry, not now. If she cried, her eyes would go red and swell up, and it would ruin her looks, which were to be her weapon. Of course, there were men in this world who liked to see women cry, but she would have to wait until she was before him before crying her beautiful tears. And so, the moisture brimming in the corner of her eyes remained locked up there and did not course down her cheeks.

The hallway was silent, and behind this large set of double doors was the bedroom. There was another intervening door within the bedroom. The designers' intent had been to make sure that noise from the corridor did not disturb anyone within.

And so, Bozes finally gathered enough courage to open the door, and she walked toward the separating door in the deepest reaches of the guest room, the one that had loomed large in her mind for a while, intending to go to where Itami was.

Bozes entered silently and approached the bedroom. Her plan was to silence Itami with the sensual pleasures of her body before his sense of foreboding woke him up.

However, as she opened the innermost door, what greeted her was a cheery, lively atmosphere.

The room was brightly lit with candles, and the maids were chatting and having tea with the soldiers from another world.

Worse, nobody seemed to have noticed Bozes' presence.

“...”

She was ignored.

“.....”

She was overlooked.

“.....”

She was about as substantial to them as air.

“Gggg....”

I worked so hard to gather my resolve, and this is how you treat me?

How dare you ignore me, Bozes, the second daughter of House Palesti?

What huge brass balls you have.

Are you mocking me for being a rag that you throw away after filling me with your seed?

Of course, she did not actually say that, but her rapidly-growing hysteria filled in the blanks for her. As a woman, she could not tolerate the insult of being overlooked.

The only way to vent the anger building within her was with the work of her two hands.

Although it is hardly professional to describe the following events with

manga-style sound effects, I hope you readers will forgive me for writing them in this way. Right after that, she did the following:

Tsukatsukatsukatsukatsuka slap!

In addition to the black right eye from yesterday, now there was a bright red palmprint on the left side of his face. In addition, it looked like some kind of five-clawed cat had scratched him on both cheeks. Truly, the victim's face was a picture of tragedy.

“That... what on earth happened?”

After a huge disturbance in the middle of the night that had nearly flipped the roof off the house, the JSDF members now stood before Piña, along with Bozes, who had been dragged before her, as well as the manor's maids.

The Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada now felt like she had swallowed a burning stone, given the scorching pain in her abdomen, and then asked for an explanation why there were more injuries on Itami's face. She was scared stiff, of course, but given her circumstances, she had to ask.

“Who else could there be but her ~nya?”

“Ara, but everyone knows that already, right, Miss Persia?”

After Kurata followed up on her words, Persia led the maids aside.

“The bruise on the right eye was already there, it had nothing to do with this time.”

After their testimonial, Rory, Lelei and Tuka stepped away from the group.

The only one left was Bozes, her hands pressed behind her back by Kurata and Kuribayashi.

Bozes lowered her head. “It, it was me”, she said, in a voice as loud as a mosquito’s buzzing.

Piña’s sigh was deeper than usual, so much so that everyone in the hall could hear it.

It wasn’t just her stomach which hurt. Piña grabbed her head, which felt like it was going to explode.

“How am I going to take care of this...?”

“Well, about that, we just came to take the Lieutenant back. We’ll let you guys handle the rest as you please. We’re moving out at dawn.”

Tomita said that in order to wash his hands of any messy responsibility. He had no idea what was going through Piña’s head. To him, all he had seen was a girl he liked beating up Itami.

But the way Tomita said it, “Do as you please”, sounded like an ultimatum to Piña.

And when Lelei translated it, her flat, emotionless tone made it seem even more like a threat.

“That... that is quite troubling...”

Piña could not just let 3rd Recon go like that, so she was looking for ways and means to keep them here, like saying “How about breakfast with us”, “Please accept our hospitality”, and so on.

Kurata stood aside and explained in an apologetic tone, “In truth, Lieutenant Itami’s been summoned to address the National Diet, so he has to get back to his country by today.”

Lelei’s translation used a slightly different word, and thus the meaning changed.

“Lieutenant Itami has been summoned by the Nihon Senate and must return by today.”

When Piña heard this, she had a look on her face much like Edvard Munch’s “The Scream”.

In the Empire, only individuals with super-elite bloodlines and careers were granted the honour of stepping into the Senate Chamber. A highly-placed

person would have a chance to steer the ship of state and become a leader of men. Even if one were a low-ranked officer, they would be permitted to brief the senators on the progress of the war, and they might even have a chance to directly address the Emperor himself.

And once Piña learned Itami had been called to speak before their Senate, she immediately mistook him to be part of Japan's elite and an important man in his country.

To think we upset such an important person... if this gets worse, the Empire is doomed, I have to think of something quickly...

At that moment, Piña instantly made a decision.

She clenched her fists and rose forcefully to express her determination.

“Then, I pray you will allow me to travel with you!”

Chapter 15

In “Snow Country”, by Kawabata Yasunari, there was a line which went:

“After the long tunnel on the border is a country of snow.”

It described how the darkness of a tunnel suddenly became a pure white snowscape, and what made it the most famous of all his works was how the author described the scene so vividly that a reader might feel they had been transported into the novel.

But if one wanted to apply that same turn of phrase to the experience of passing through the “Gate”, it would be impossible.

Normally, anyone would be moved if they were walking down Ginza and suddenly saw a sprawling natural landscape before them.

However, there was now an asphalt road on both the Special Region and Ginza exits of the “Gate”, and the “Gate” itself was surrounded by a concrete dome, so anyone emerging from either side of the gate would only see a featureless gray landscape.

In addition, the extensive security measures established around the “Gate” — including fingerprints, palmprints, biometric and retina scans — formed countless layers of barriers before entry, and these troublesome procedures killed any romance the trip might have had.

In addition, every vehicle that went in and out of the Special Region was subjected to a thorough disinfection before being allowed to proceed.

After leaving the concrete dome, one would see several freshly-constructed buildings, so new their paint had not yet had the chance to dry. Around these buildings would be the six-pointed star fort, enwrapping the entire site in a solid defensive fortification.

Outside the star fort, on the surroundings of Arnus Hill, the terrain was reshaped into something that could have come out of a field defensive tactics manual, with communications trenches and all sorts of obstacles, filled with an amount of chain link fences and concrete bunkers that might have been considered “paranoid”. All of these denied entry to anyone who tried to approach.

There was a stretch of trees to the south of Arnus Hill.

This was the site of the Arnus Living Community, where Lelei and the other refugees from Coda Village lived. Although it was surrounded by forest, trees in the Special Region looked almost the same as those in Japan, so probably nobody but a trained botanist could tell the difference.

On the east of the hill, they were building a runway and hangars.

They had already set up a miniature airfield on one corner of the base, and inside one could see them assembling several F-4 Phantom jets.

Probably nobody would be moved any more after passing through the “Gate”, given the extensive development of the surroundings.

In truth, passing through the Gate was less exciting than visiting a certain theme park based off an American mouse. They would probably be very disappointed.

Still, it was not as though the JSDF lacked a sense of fun or adventure, just that to a normal person, a theme park would be much more comfortable than a garrison base like this. To servicemen, who were already used to the sterile, boring environs of a military base, these were just everyday sights, but to civilians it would be like stepping into another world that felt wrong, in a sense.

One could say that now, there was no difference in the scenery on both sides of the “Gate”.

Because of that, to Piña Co Lada, and Bozes Co Palesti, Arnus Hill itself was like another world to them.

Piña had made a request regarding the treaty violation — she had asked to personally apologize to Col. Kengun and the other high-ranking officials in person. Itami approved, and he had agreed to take her with him.

That said, Itami did not have time to wait for Piña and her followers to slowly catch up with them on horseback. Therefore, Itami had added another condition: “Only you and one other follower are allowed to ride in the HMOV

with us”. In truth, Itami was hoping that they would be discouraged and give up.

Piña’s response was to assign Bozes and Panache to Italica’s security, while Hamilton would liaise with and act as the representative for House Formal. She announced that “I will go myself” in a determined, confident manner.

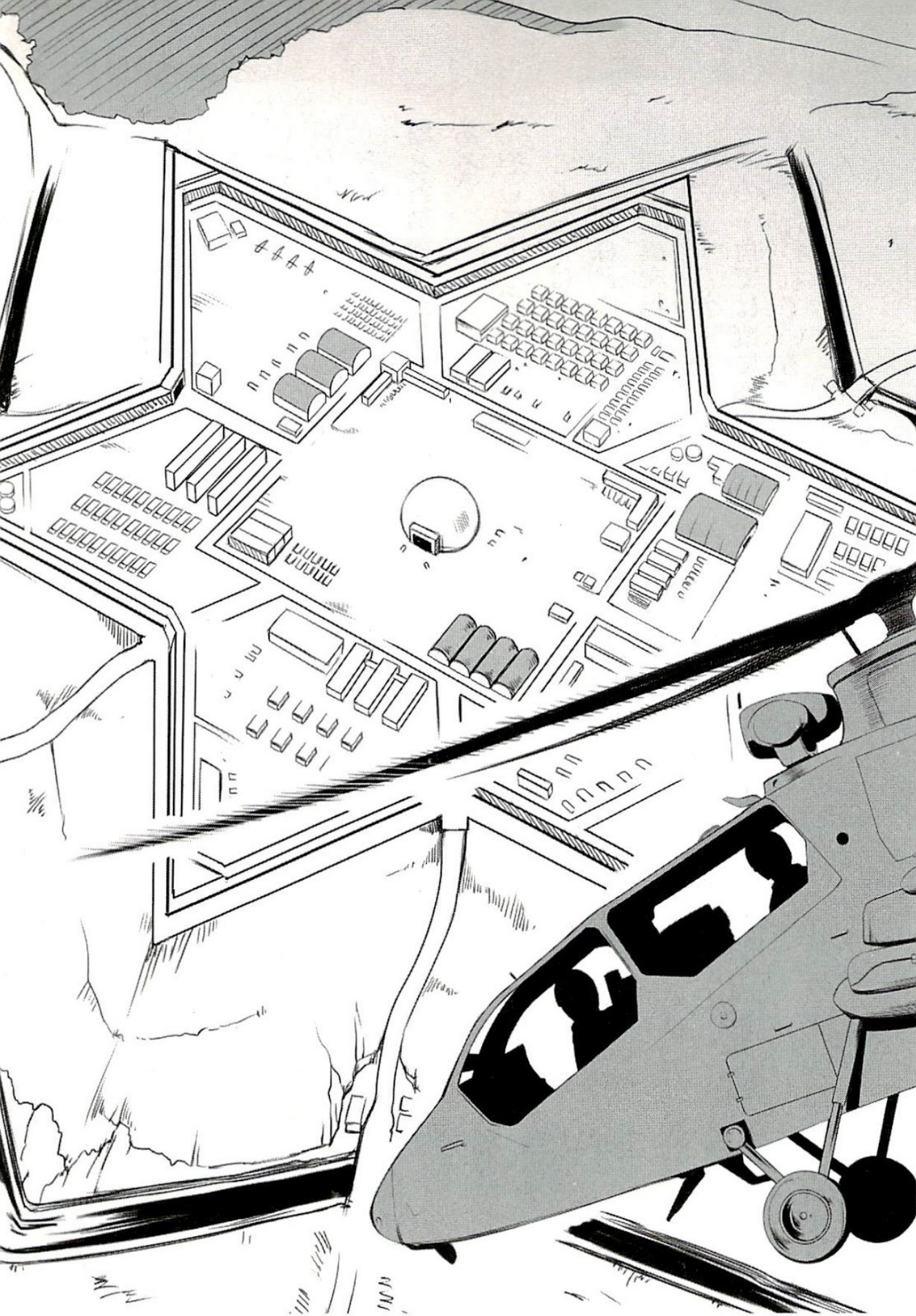
However, they could not let their Princess walk alone into the enemy camp. Bozes and Panache were arguing over who would get to accompany her, and Piña finally selected Bozes to follow her. After hurriedly packing their things, they boarded Itami’s HMT.

With the HMT’s high speeds, they swiftly made it to Arnus.

The scenery there was no longer familiar to Piña and Bozes.

What had once been a bare hill was now a fortress.

A flight of three helicopters on a training mission greeted Piña, as they turned overhead while flying a nap-of-earth course. Their powerful engines created a mighty downwash that seemed like it was going to sweep the surface clean.



3rd Recon drove down the newly-built road among the flying sand and dust.

After passing the OPL (Outpost Picket Line), they entered the territory controlled by the JSDF.

The large space they had just entered was called the FEBA (Forward Edge of the Battle Area), which was used as a training and practice area. At the same time, it was a boneyard for numerous wyvern corpses, as well as where the children of Coda Village's refugees went to work.

The first thing Piña saw was JSDF troops formed up into squads with a flagbearer at their head holding their unit flag high above himself. They were chanting some mysterious magic spell that she couldn't understand while running in the opposite direction of the convoy and swiftly passing by.

“Model A Ford and a tank full of gas!”

“Hand full of pussy and a mouth full of ass!”

“Sound off!” “One, two!”

“Sound off!” “Three, four!”

“Sound off!” “One, two” (Two and a half beat pause) “THREE-FOUR!”

...at least, that was what the arcane incantation sounded like to Piña's ears

when the men ran past the convoy.

The speed of the vehicles left them far behind, but before Piña could turn to watch them, the skeletons of several buildings came up by the side of the road.

The JSDF had considered the possibility of street-to-street fighting during a theoretical invasion of the Imperial capital, so they had asked Master Kato to supply blueprints of an average residential building in the city.

They had turned these blueprints into mockups of Imperial buildings, which the soldiers used to practice their urban combat tactics.

Initially, Piña had no idea what these troopers were up to.

In the Special Region, the most common form of attack was having infantry or cavalry charge into close quarters with the enemy while shouting “Waaaaagh!” or some other bloodcurdling battlecry.

Once contact was made, it was every man for himself. They would strike down the enemy before them with blades, spears or shield bashes. Unlike the barbarian tribes on the frontier, the Imperial Army did not allow their legionaries to fight by themselves. Instead, their centurions would maintain order and rotate out the men on the front line of the formation to the rear as they got tired. Their enemy would fight until they got tired and then they would be cut down, but the Imperial Army would always have their freshest troops in the frontline, while their tired and wounded would recuperate in the

rear.

This basic combat tactic remained the same whether they fought on open plains or dense city streets. The commander's job was to raise the men's fighting spirit, train their fighting skills, and lead them to victory over the enemy.

However, the JSDF were different. They did not use shields, nor did they form a dense testudo formation. They would spread out to sprint, halt and drop prone, all the while communicating with hand gestures. They were a closely-knit, well oiled machine that switched between stillness and motion with a fluid grace.

At the same time, they were raising metal staves in all directions. They looked like hedgehogs.

What on earth are they doing? Piña tilted her head as she thought, but could not find an answer.

“They’re all holding staves like Itami. Could it be that all the soldiers in the Jayesdeef are mages? If that’s the case, is that the secret of their power?”

Bozes answered Piña’s question with a question of her own, “But mages are rare, since magic is a special ability. Then, does that mean the Jayesdeef can produce mages in large quantities?”

Piña could imagine how those staves could strike down the enemy with

beams of searing light. After that, she understood what the Jayesdeef were training for; their movements were calculated to conceal themselves and respond to the enemies' own movements, in order to find their foe and kill them in any environment or surroundings.

Even if they were ambushed from dark corners, even if they were fired on from high windows by snipers, even if they were flanked from both sides by Imperial cavalry, before enemy troops could close the distance to the Jayesdeef, they would be turned into Swiss cheese by their fire-staves.

“No, these metal staves are not magic. In their language, they are weapons which are called ‘guns’, or “small arms’.”

From the side, Lelei denied Bozes' answer.

“The Jayesdeef uses these guns as the basis of their fighting ability. In order to make full use of their guns in combat, they have trained and developed their skills to this level.”

“They're weapons? That is to say, they're like our swords or bows?”

“Yes. The principle is simple too. They enchant a piece of lead with explosive magic, seal it within a metal tube, and then they let the lead fly free.”

While inspecting the piles of wyvern corpses on the battlefield, she had found many huge holes in the bodies. A closer inspection of their shattered scales revealed lead chunks and other fragments. Working backward from there,

Lelei had deduced the mechanism of firearms by careful analysis of what she had seen, heard and learned.

Piña's vision suddenly blurred as she heard this. "So it's not magic, but a weapon? So since humans can make these weapons, they can distribute them to all of their soldiers?"

"Exactly. They can arm every soldier with these guns."

"If that's the case, then obviously the way they wage war would be different. No matter how many men with spears or swords we raised, their numbers would be useless in the face of an enemy who fought like this."

"Yes. This is why the Imperial Army and the Coalition Army were defeated."

Out of the blue, a Type 96 armored personnel carrier roared up beside them. The rear hatch opened, disgorging a number of fully-armed and equipped men.

The soldiers who rushed out of the vehicle swiftly formed a neat firing line, their weapons pointed at imaginary opponents.

In this moment, Piña could vividly imagine cavalry and infantry being gunned down in their ranks, and she furrowed her brows in anxiety.

"Too slow! Move your asses faster! Again!"

In response to their commander's rebuke, the JSDF troopers got back onto the APC. After watching them train like this, Piña could not help but think "So there's a huge difference even from their basic fighting styles". Unlike the fear which had been deeply engraved into her soul in Italica, she was afraid because she could now understand her opponent, and it frightened her.

She turned to look inside the HMT, and she saw Itami, Kuwabara, Kurata and the others holding the non-magical weapons they called "guns". If they were weapons, even Piña or Bozes should be able to use them if they got their hands on one of them.

If they could fully understand these weapons and obtain them, then at least future battles would not be one-sided slaughters like what had happened previously. Piña understood the importance of this. Her aim now was to obtain these weapons and pass them on to the best craftsmen she could find, and force them to make more, at any cost.

As though reading Piña's thoughts, Lelei quietly chimed in from the side.

"That would be pointless."

Lelei pointed outside, through another of the vehicle's windows.

On the open ground opposite them, something that looked like a cross between a crazed elephant and a block of metal was thundering toward them. It was a Type 74 Main Battle Tank.

“When they say ‘small arms’, they mean that these weapons are small guns. So that means that there should be ‘big guns’ as well.”

They looked at the Type 74 as it turned its turret, their eyes going to its 105mm rifled cannon.

“Does, does that spit fire too?”

Piña’s thoughts were the same as Bozes’ murmured words. She realized that this cannon was the so called “rod of iron” which the refugees of Coda Village told her about.

“I have not seen it fire myself, but I do not doubt that it can do so.”

No blacksmith in the Empire could make such a thing. And it was not just the Empire, but nobody on the continent could build things like that. It probably would not make a difference whether she searched among the underground world of the elves or among the master craftsmen of the dwarves. It was a monster from another world, and she could fully believe that it could defeat a Flame Dragon.

Iron pegasi. Iron elephants. What was this JSDF, this force that could produce these things in such great numbers?

Why did we even attack them in the first place?

In response to Piña’s quiet mutterings, Lelei replied:

“The Empire has trod on the griffin’s tail.”

“You, you... don’t talk like it doesn’t concern you! The Empire is in a crisis for survival, how can you speak so easily about it?”

Bozes angrily grabbed Lelei’s shoulder, and in return she received an even more hateful answer.

“I am of the Rurudo Clan. The Empire’s well-being has nothing to do with me.”

The Rurudo were a nomadic people. Although Lelei had settled down near Coda Village, she and her people had never had any particular opinion about the Empire.

Tuka, who had been listening but did not have a chance to cut in, rushed to raise her hand and say, “Yes, I’m an Elf!”

“...”

Rory remained silent. She did not need to say anything, and simply smiled.

The Empire had made the Allied Kingdoms bend their knees and ruled over its citizens with force.

The Emperor did not expect his subjects to love, respect, or do anything but fear him.

The Empire's policy of conquest, suppression and rulership through violence had led to the present situation — despite its dominance over them, it did not have the loyalty of its subjects.

It was only now that Piña realised the consequences of the Empire's actions.

Piña was brought to Arnus Hill, to a building with a plaque on the front that read “Special Region Expeditionary Force Command”.

She parted ways with Itami and the others here.

Escorted by a uniformed female officer, Piña and Bozes were guided up a flight of steps and into the depths of the building.

Following that, they were brought to a waiting room for a short time.

The waiting room was unappealingly small and it had little in the way of decoration, but the high-backed chairs were very comfortable. The craftsmanship of the table also seemed very exquisite. It must have been the work of a renowned craftsman.

Just as they were starting to get bored of this room, a knocking came from the outside.

Piña and Bozes practically jumped out of their seats.

The man who entered looked like he had just reached middle age.

His black hair was streaked with gray, and he had a crewcut the way Kengun did. However, unlike Kengun, he had a warm smile on his face. He seemed gentle enough, but there was a hint of strength within that kindness.

Piña felt that his green uniform was too sparsely decorated, apart from the set of colored bars on his uniform's breast.

In truth, she found it hard to believe he was the general of an army. After all, in her experience, a high-ranking officer's chest, shoulders and entire body would be plastered with medals, jewels and other decorations. This austere look of his made him seem like a humble footsoldier.

However, since she had arrived here, Piña realized that this army despised meaningless ornamentation and instead valued actual competency. Therefore, she had no doubts about this man.

She immediately understood that the man before her might well be the highest-ranking officer of this otherworldly army, or at least, he was one of them.

Behind him, Kengun stood at attention behind the middle-aged man, whispering into his ear from time to time. Kengun seemed to be a relaxed person who was nevertheless devoted to his job.

There was another man behind Kengun. He had a sly smile on his face, and he had entered with the female JSDF officer. They all wore the same green uniform, though there were differences between them. From Piña's observations, she concluded that the mottled Jayesdeef green uniform must be some sort of camouflage used in combat, and it was different from the single-colored green uniform used for ceremonial purposes.

Finally, Lelei entered the room, standing beside the middle-aged man.

The middle-aged man smiled, and said something to Lelei.

Lelei nodded, and then translated his words to Piña and Bozes: "This is the General of the Jayesdeef, His Excellency General Hajama. Following that, Piña also introduced herself and Bozes to this General Hajama. Because Lelei did not fully understand Japanese, she used her native language to fill in the blanks.

"This is the Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada. Forgive me, but I do not know how they address princesses in the country of Japan."

"Over here, we address them as 'Your Highness'. Then, how do you address members of royalty in this world?"

"There are slight differences between men and women, but for ladies, 'francea' will do."

After listening to Lelei's advice, Hazama gestured to Piña to take a seat.

"Please have a seat, Francea and Miss Bozes."

After that, Hazama and his entourage sat down one by one, and they began speaking, while Lelei served as their translator.

"I believe we signed a treaty earlier, but what happened to bring Your Highness here in person?"

"The truth is, due to carelessness on our part, a misunderstanding occurred. We deeply regret the events which followed, and we hope you will forgive us our trespasses."

"I've already seen the report. Did some accident take place then?"

"Yes. I am ashamed that it happened."

"Is that so? Although, we wish for your Highness to continue being an intermediary between us and the Empire. If the events that have caused you such grief require it, we can also reconsider the terms of the treaty."

The Japanese attitude to diplomacy was to respond flexibly to minor setbacks. However, this way of thinking was quite problematic for diplomats, in particular Piña, who represented Italica and House Formal. To her, denying the treaty was equivalent to the Jayesdeef attacking them. Therefore, she misinterpreted General Hazama's words as "If you don't obey the treaty, we

will destroy you”. The addition of “We wish for your Highness to continue being an intermediary between us and the Empire” made her feel even more uncomfortable.

“No, no, actually—”

The man with the sly smile, who had been sitting to one side all this time, suddenly cut in.

“I’ve been briefed by Itami. May I ask why this lady would have cause to strike him?”

Halfway through Lelei’s translation, Piña and Bozes were already sweating bullets.

In the end, they still could not silence Itami. The two of them had tried to cut in at every possible opportunity, offering every lewd temptation they could muster, but ultimately, none of their attempts had worked. Then again, it would have been a miracle if Itami had actually allowed himself to fall victim to a crude seduction by a woman who beat him up one night and then smiled sweetly to him while saying “Come oooon~” the next morning.

“I confess, I wanted to laugh when I saw that palmprint and those scratches. Itami even wanted to claim them as “injuries sustained in the line of duty”, but no matter how you see it, they look like the wounds from a quarrel between a couple. Did he do anything distasteful to either of you?”

The way he smiled while earnestly asking, “Did Itami do or say anything to provoke this violence?” made Piña think of him as a snake, with all the accompanying negative impressions.

He refused to drop the matter and kept asking questions like, “Why did you strike him?”, “Was there a reason you had to strike him?” during any lull in the conversation. It was clingy and annoying, to say the least.

He did nothing wrong, yet he was assaulted for no reason. The words of this snake-like man, while not inherently judgmental, sounded like he was condemning them every time he spoke.

“ ... ”

Piña could barely squeeze out a response, and in the end, Lelei said something to the man with the sly smile. Following which, the sly smile became a mocking smile, and he introduced himself.

“I do apologize for not introducing myself. My name is Yanagida, and I am pleased to meet you.”

To Piña, it sounded like “I’m Yanagida, remember it.”

“Well then~ looks like all that’s left is dinner and going to bed.”

They had already returned their unused rounds to the ammunition dump, while their rifles were signed back into the armory after the necessary maintenance (Kuribayashi's rifle was a write-off. It had taken irreparable damage when it had been used to block a sword strike, and the armory had signed off on it), and their vehicles were returned to the vehicle pool after cleaning the mud and sand off them. Sunset had come and gone by the time they finished these chores, and there was no time left to eat.

And then, he still had to write and submit reports, and tomorrow he would be going before the National Diet, and after that he still had to wait for further instructions... just the thought was enough to tire Itami out.

In any case, he'd worry about that later. Itami opened his desk and placed various documents into a folder before slotting it back into the depths of his table, but then he spotted a blinking light on the phone he left in there. It would seem he had received an e-mail.

Now who could that be from? While thinking that, he opened the messages and saw that they were from Risa and His Excellency Taro.

The two of them were Itami's otaku comrades. In Taro's case, he proudly used his real name, so those around him jokingly called him "His Excellency", a title that he sportingly accepted.

Risa seemed to have written something that resembled a report, and then plainly added at the end

“Please lend me money ♡”. After that there was a second, and then a third e-mail, which were accounts of tragedy that read like “Send reinforcements immediately!” and “I don’t have water, food or gas!” However, there was only a day or two between the e-mails, so the situation could not have gotten as bad as she said.

This woman basically treated Itami — with his stable income as a public servant — as a credit card with no limit. She would impulse-buy figures or other expensive goods, which would then affect her ability to pay her living expenses. He felt that he could not leave her be, but at the same time he also felt that he was just enabling her.

Taro’s e-mail, on the other hand, simply asked about how he had been lately, and if he was free for a meet up.

Although he had almost forgotten which season it was during his time in the Special Region, it was almost winter back on Earth. The year was coming to an end, and Itami was thinking that it was about time he started applying for leave to do things. It had been about half a year since the summer doujin event was cancelled, so the winter event would be more crowded than ever before.

If His Excellency Taro is asking to meet me, it’s plainly obvious he doesn’t want to squeeze in at the doujin market with others, but instead he wants me to buy his titles for him.

Although he had been summoned back to the homeland as a witness, Itami’s

first priority was to get the catalog for the market.

Just as he was thinking this, the lights-out signal went out, and the lights to his block were cut.

Ah, it's so late that even the cafeteria and canteen are closed by now.

Since there was nothing to be done, Itami took out several cans of food from his desk (combat ration type 1 — chicken rice, preserved daikon, assorted vegetables) and opened them.

At this moment, there was a knocking from the door.

When Itami looked outside, he saw nobody there. For a moment he thought someone was pranking him, until he saw Lelei waiting in the darkened hallway.

“It's pretty late, what's the matter with you?”

Lelei was able to translate various documents into Japanese, so she had been temporarily employed as a “specialist” (she was paid for that, of course, albeit in yen). As a result, she could come and go freely within the base. In order to avoid being mistaken for an insomniac wanderer, she wore her ID pass hanging around her neck and came here while carrying her basket.

“Itami, I'm tired. Send me back to the camp.”

With that, she tossed her staff aside and sat down. Lelei was not the type to easily show her emotions and she was used to enduring hardship. For her to actually show weakness by saying “I’m tired” meant that she must have been exhausted. After all, interpreting for Hazama and Piña must have been very draining.

“Eaten yet?”

It was hard to speak, so she groaned and shook her head. The way she looked at Itami was like a puppy that had been abandoned by the roadside.

“Ah~ but I can’t drive now, why don’t you just sleep here? There’s a lot of room here anyway.”

The camp where she lived was a pretty long distance away from here.

Besides, if he wanted to leave the base at night, he would have to do so in full gear. In addition, he could not move around alone. Therefore, he would have to wake up someone from 3rd Recon to accompany him. Then he would have to request and fill out more forms and book a vehicle and it would be a pain in the ass. That being the case, it would be better to find Lelei a bed so she could sleep here.

Lelei seemed to have trusted everything to Itami, given the way she nodded and murmured before closing her eyes and drifting off to sleep.

Then, time to set the bed.

Every serviceman in the JSDF had a bed that consisted of one mattress, one pillow, five towels (one was for decoration), one pillow case, two bedsheets and one blanket (the abovementioned did not apply when new bed provisions were available).

Since the materials provided were limited, the sleeping arrangements one could produce with them were also limited.

First, he laid down three dust covers. Since a dust cover was roughly half the size of a bed, he had to layer the three towels over each other.

On top of that, he spread two bedsheets. He laid one piece on one side of the pillow and the other at the foot of the bed, then he carefully folded each one under the mattress in a hospital fold, so that the sleeper could tuck themselves into one or both sides and feel like they were wrapped up.

After that, he laid the last two dust covers on the pillow side and the foot of the bed, folding them into another set of hospital corners, with all the care of wrapping a present. Then he laid the pillow down as well as the bedsheets, tucking it in under the mattress. With that, the bed was made.

He laid another blanket over this warm little nest.

After making the bed, Itami lifted Lelei in his arms and laid her down.

Her hair was pure white, and her clear skin was as flawless as porcelain.

People might have mistaken her for a life-size doll. Since Itami had no interest in that sort of thing, he covered her up with the blanket, but at this moment he felt that he could empathize with those people who liked looking at young girls.

As he thought that, Itami frantically shook his head while thinking, “No, no! Anyway, it’d be laughable for someone my age to be turned on by a girl like that.” He tried to rationalize it away with his psychological defences, but during the year Itami had graduated from high school, there had been a girl in his class who had been pregnant and gave birth to a baby. Thinking about it now, it did not seem impossible.

Lelei said she was 15, but she seemed less developed and curvy compared to a Japanese girl of 15. Lelei did not just look younger than her age, but she seemed more delicate too. Still, when it came to being older than they looked, there were two prime examples right here.

Suddenly, his vision blurred as he was looking at Lelei.

If this went on, he would fall asleep soon.

No, no, if I fell asleep here, somebody will see it and get the wrong idea. I need to get back to my room to sleep, he thought.

Not long ago, Kurata was teasing him by asking, “Say, Lieutenant, do you like DFC?”

Granted, Itami knew he wasn’t very good around carnivorous, mature

women, but it was ridiculous to have that interpreted into a taste for flat chests. If pressed, Itami would say that breast size was irrelevant, only the shape of the body.

In other words, he did not dare lay a finger on Lelei. Furthermore, waiting unnecessarily beside a sleeping girl would invite unwelcome gossip from people. He had to get out of here right now.

However, it was around this time that his body suddenly started feeling heavy.

After spending all night in combat, being taken prisoner halfway back to base, being marched all the way back to Italica and yet another night without rest, the accumulated fatigue was too much for Itami to resist.

And so, Itami passed out.

In the end, against all of his wishes, Itami ended up falling asleep on Lelei's tummy.

The next day, 11 AM, in front of the concrete dome.

Today's sunshine was exceptionally bright. Itami was standing still, a blank expression on his face.

He was wearing a Type 91 winter jacket, which made sense for Japan's weather, but considering the climate was still warm on this side of the gate, it felt too hot. Because of that, he was only wearing the jacket and had his sleeves rolled up.

Passing officers might have frowned on his poor personal grooming, but after noticing his winter clothing, their expressions turned to wry grins which made him uncomfortable.

The summer uniform was fine on this side of the gate, but anyone going back to Japan, which was in the middle of winter, would have to dress appropriately. The discrepancy in seasons was funny in its own way.

“So slow...”

For the most part, everyone everywhere should have a sense of time, but he did not know how it was for people in the Special Region. After all, they did not have clocks, so they might not have the habit of being on time as well.

So I'll wait then, Itami thought as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Eventually, the people he was waiting for finally arrived.

“Kuribayashi~ Tomita~ you guys took too long!”

“Sorry, Lieutenant, we were delayed because we were taking care of things.”

In contrast to the uniformed Itami, Kuribayashi and Tomita were in civilian

clothes.

“It’s so hot out, why’re you wearing so much?”

That had been Tuka, speaking in a soft voice. Lelei gave Itami a long and intense look, while that black-clad Gothic Lolita had followed them, of course.

Rory’s huge halberd was wrapped in canvas, but she didn’t seem happy with the procedure, so she kept pouting and making little noises of protest.

“It can’t be helped, if you carry that big thing through the “Gate”, you’ll violate the Firearms and Blades Regulation Act and the Weapon Possession Act among other laws, and the police will arrest you immediately. They’ve been really strict on this lately, and it’s no laughing matter. In truth, they wanted you to leave it behind before going over.”

“And how could I leave behind this proof of Emroy’s will?”

“That’s why I said, you need to bear with this for a bit.”

For Rory, she had no other choice if she wanted to go to the other side of the “Gate”.

Itami, the commander in charge during the battle with the Flame Dragon, was not the only one being summoned by the Diet. Several other witnesses from the affected refugees had been called too.

Among these “affected refugees”, the presence of Lelei was essential, because she could translate for both sides. Although her services were in high demand recently, almost to the point of abuse, all they could do was ask her to bear with it. General Hazama had even told her in person that after the meeting with the Diet, as compensation for her hard work, he would arrange for her to have fun and relax in Japan before coming back.

Tuka would be coming along because she would be living proof that the Special Region contained other sentient species besides Humans. Her mere existence would answer many questions and to the media, it would have great persuasive power.

As for Rory... well, she looked human enough, and resembled a child. With that black priest’s garb on top of that, what if she were mistaken for a cosplaying girl brought along to make up the numbers?

Although demigods were feared and respected in this world’s legends (not including the countless stories of luckless others being killed off), it would be troubling if she wanted to demonstrate her “divine power” in the diet. As a result, Itami was in a dilemma over how to handle her.

But the main reason they had brought her along was because she said, “How could you leave me out of something so fun?”

In addition, Kuribayashi and Tomita were there as their guards.

“All right~ that should be it. Then, let’s move out.”

Just as Itami said this, a car drove up in front of Itami and stopped there.

Yanagida got out of the passenger seat and raised a hand in greeting.

“Sorry, sorry, the procedures took a bit more time than anticipated.”

What was this guy up too? Just as Itami was starting to get annoyed by looking at him, Yanagida opened the rear door of the vehicle, and invited the two people within to alight.

“Her Imperial Highness Piña Co Lada and her Excellency the Marchioness Bozes Co Palesti. These two will be accompanying you secretly to Japan. Please take care of them.”

Piña and Bozes got out of the car and lined up in front of Itami.

“Oi, Yanagida, we never talked about this.”

“Ah? Didn’t I tell you before? Then it shouldn’t be too late to explain to you now, right? I’ve made the arrangements with Ichigaya Park (a hotel run by the Defense Ministry), and the hotel at Izu is settled too. Go enjoy your three day vacation.”

“You... don’t you remember how Her Imperial Highness and friend saw to me?”

“Oh? The mistake from earlier? Well, just laugh it off, why don’t you?”

“I can’t.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, don’t worry about it. In any case, Her Imperial Highness will be an important intermediary between our government and theirs, so it was only natural that she requested to come to our country to learn more about it.”

“If that’s the case, then why is she coming with me?”

“Well, you just happen to be headed home, right? Besides, we don’t have anyone else who can translate while going sightseeing at the same time.”

With that, Yanagida drew close to Itami and spoke softly to him while sliding a white envelope into Itami’s pocket.

“Courtesy of General Hazama. Use it to show the girls a good time.”

Chapter 16

From the diary of Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada:

“After passing through the boundary known as the “Gate”, I saw rows and rows of towers which scraped the sky. At this time, I wondered; what did the men of the Imperial Army who first set foot here think? Did they have any idea of their upcoming fate? Nestled within the valleys between these vast buildings, I realized how small I truly was. The fact that we have declared war on a country that built such magnificent structures makes me worry for the fate of the Empire.”

Then again, Ginza would not have things like skyscrapers. If one thought about it, most of the tall buildings one might see would be found in places like Shinjuku or New York.

On the topic of grand structures, Piña and Bozes considered the Imperial Palace, the Senate building, and various other military strongholds to be quite impressive, so to them, even walking down Ginza must have struck them dumb with awe.

Having a tall building among regular buildings would only make the tall building stand out more.

Because of that, from Piña’s point of view, a capital city should be planned so that there would be an awe-inspiring structure standing in the middle. However, the city on the other side of the “Gate” was different. All its

buildings were massive skyscrapers.

If there were a single giant tree, one might still be at peace when looking at it from underneath. However, a forest of giant trees would inflict an enormous pressure on those beneath it.

Standing there, Piña's and Bozes' hearts were deeply shaken by the sights before them.

Of course, they were not the only two affected by it. Lelei, Tuka and Rory were staring with eyes wide open, oblivious to the cold even though they stood at the heart of Ginza in the winter.

“Ara, good thing I didn't miss you guys.”

A voice called out to Itami from behind the five girls, just as he was about to leave the sentry post.

Turning around, he saw a group of black-suited men. At their head stood their leader, a middle-aged man.

“You must be Lieutenant Itami.”

“Yes, that's me.”

“I'm Komakado from Intel. We'll be handling escort and guidance duties for this operation.”

The man was smiling, but the smile did not reach his eyes. He had the same forceful aura around him as JSDF trainees who had just completed the Ranger course. One could describe it as a pressure, but to him as a JSDF trooper, it was more like a razor-edged look in his eyes.

The way this man smiled superficially was not entirely like that of a soldier. He might have come from the Public Security branch of the police, or perhaps another intelligence agency. He might even have been the result of the exchange program between the JSDF and the police.

“Tell me, are you really from the JSDF?”

“As I thought, was it so easy to tell?”

“You don’t feel like a proper serviceman. If a pure JSDF officer was handling this, there would probably be leaks.”

The corners of Komakado’s mouth turned up in a wicked smile.

“Hmm, you’re no ordinary guy. As expected of a man who was at Nijubashi. You know, I read up on your background before I came here.”

“Nothing worth mentioning, I hope?”

“Not exactly. After graduating from an average university with average grades, you entered the officer cadet course and ended up graduating second

from the bottom in your batch, as a second lieutenant. The bottom cadet was injured during training and washed out. So in truth, you would be the bottom of your cohort, am I wrong?”

He flipped through his notebook.

“Some people commented that it was unfair that you passed while the injured fellow had to flunk out. Your performance appraisals wavered on the border of acceptable and unacceptable... and eventually you managed to somehow scrape through. The superiors you angered sent you to the Ranger course, but for some reason, even though you trailed at the back of your cohort, you were never washed out. Your teammates treated you as a plague and avoided you, and for some reason you were posted to Narashino. Although you were slated to be a permanent 2nd Lieutenant, after the Nijubashi incident you were promoted to 1st Lieutenant.”

Komakado recited Itami’s history from his black leather notebook as he flipped through it.

“Your fellow soldiers had the following opinions of you: “otaku”, “a true salary thief”, “at least he understands the JSDF’s anti-war values”. Kukuku, how interesting.”

As this fellow delivered his scathing lecture, Itami scratched the back of his scalp.

“So how did someone like you get into ‘S’?”

Acha~ Itami sagged his shoulders as he heard the question. That was a prickly one.

“I think there was a paper some time ago which said that among all the worker ants in a colony, 20% are slackers?”

“?”

“It means, no matter what kind of ants you have, 20% of them will become slackers.”

“I see. So in order to ensure none of the elite, handpicked ants backslide into slackers, you need to have slackers in there to begin with?”

“I bullshitted my superiors when they lectured me about slacking off. The logic might sound strange, but rather than gathering a group of elites together and having 20% of them become slackers, why not just include those slackers from the beginning and minimize the decay of skilled personnel? Back then, there were a spate of suicide cases in the WAIR (JGSDF Western Army Infantry Regiment (Light)), so the unit took that suggestion seriously.”

“Kukuku, so, is that how someone like you got into the Special Forces? If anyone knew that someone as easygoing and slack as you could get in, they’d bang their heads on the wall while wailing about how they were doing worse than you.”

Komakado's words made Itami sigh deeply.

And just at this moment—

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh~”

A shrill cry of despair rang out from the side, like a girl who had been abandoned by her lover.

On closer inspection, the one crying out was Kuribayashi.

Her face was pale, and that was not a joke or exaggeration. To her, the fact that Itami was a Ranger was a seemingly irreconcilable paradox, and now she learned he was from the Special Forces. This otaku, this supreme slacker, to think he was a member of the Special Forces she admired! Learning that fact plunged her into the deepest despair, and she wanted to curse this world and scream her anger to her enemies.

“Noooooooooooo~!!!”

She ran off like a frightened rabbit, although since there were obstacles set up around the “Gate”, she could not go far.

Tomita gave chase, and when he caught up, he patted her gently on the back to show that he understood, comforting her like he would a victim of sexual assault.

Komakado could not help but laugh as he saw this. He tried his best to keep his voice down, but in the end, he was still laughing while grabbing his belly. After a while, Komakado managed to calm down and catch his breath. He straightened himself up, and then bowed to Itami.

“You aren’t an ordinary man. Being able to pretend to be a lazy ant among the other hardworking ants is an impressive feat. I respect you, and I mean that.”

“No way, someone tell me he’s lying... Ah, this is just a dream, it can’t possibly be real~”

Kuribayashi covered her face with her hands and tried to deny reality. She radiated an aura of gloom and despair. Fortunately, the microbus from Intelligence Branch picked this time to show up. It was a godsend, because the interior was spacious.

Kuribayashi sat in the rear seats, while Itami was all the way in front, sitting beside the driver, in order to avoid being contaminated by the aura of misery around her. Rory, Piña and the others did not dislike Kuribayashi, and Rory herself was actually favorably inclined toward her, but they decided to cluster near the front in order to keep their distance from Kuribayashi.

Her exaggerated reaction was somewhat problematic.

“Lieutenant Itami, where are we headed?”

The question came from the Intelligence Branch driver, who was wearing a suit.

“We’ll go get some clothes first. Since we’re out of time, just take us to some place that sells suits, we can’t let them go on camera like this.”

Rory, Tuka and Lelei needed some proper clothes before they went before the Diet. In particular, Tuka’s T-shirt and jeans did not look like something that a person testifying before the National Diet should wear.

Originally, the plan was to let Kuribayashi pick out clothes for them, but since she was suffering a mental breakdown, the task fell to Itami, the man with no taste whatsoever. If Kurokawa were there, she would definitely try to stop Itami from doing something stupid.

The driver in black informed his superiors about where they were going, then started up the microbus and set off.

The area surrounding the Ginza side of the “Gate” was under the jurisdiction of the JSDF, and some people called it the “Ginza Garrison”. However, once their vehicle left the restricted zone, they were back in the heart of Ginza again. The girls from the Special Region could not help but stare in awe at the sights which now surrounded them.

Although, that was inevitable. The reason was because after the Ginza Incident, the shopping districts in Ginza now sported all manner of shiny decorations, festival lights and Christmas trees to draw in customers, and the

glass display windows showcased name-brand clothing, expensive jewellery, and all the things which would draw a girl's attention.

The Ginza district did not look like a place which had been the site of a battlefield just half a year ago. The roads were packed with cars and the shoppers thronged the streets.

Of course, there were shops which had not reopened, and which were sealed off by thick metal shutters. For most of them, their owners had died during the Ginza Incident.

Other shops had lost their staff to the fighting, and had gone out of business.

Even so, there were still a lot of people who wanted to restore Ginza to its former glory, and they brought in more and more customers. This might be the resilience of the Japanese people.

“There are a lot of people here. Could this be a marketplace?”

“Ah, look at that dress...”

Piña and Bozes were whispering a conversation to each other.

The microbus stopped in front of a clothing store which specialized in Western fashions.

Itami sought out a female sales attendant and handed Tuka to her while saying, “Get her a formal-looking set of clothes, to be worn right away. The

cheapest will do, just send the bill to this address.” Because Itami emphasised “cheapest”, the lady brought Tuka to the returns section, where the cheaper clothes were.

“Rory, Lelei, do you want to wear something more formal too?”

Rory walked one full turn around the store, looking at both male and female fashions, before declining. “I’m not really interested in these clothes. Besides, this is my priestess’ formal wear.”

Lelei replied, “No need.” Unlike Rory, she seemed completely uninterested in new clothing.

Well, Lelei’s robe probably qualifies as an ethnic costume. The problem is Rory’s goth-loli clothes. Even if she says it’s formal wear, there’s no way anyone would believe it. We’ll just have to insist that it’s a set of ethnic clothing that just so happens to resemble a goth-loli outfit.

On the other hand, Piña and Bozes were looking at the clothes on display, but their attention was focused on the quality of the fabric used to make them.

They were currently wearing Imperial nobles’ clothing, suitable for semi-formal events.

Those clothes were made of very high-quality, hand-stitched silk, designed for use in garden parties or mounted activities. In that sense, it was like a medieval musketeer’s uniform.

With the addition of a sidearm sword, it would make a good set of casual clothing for a knight.

However, Yanagida firmly forbade them to carry weapons through the “Gate”, so Bozes and Panache had gone through with nothing at their waists.

The only complaint about these clothes was that their fabric was too thin, so they considered buying a winter coat. However, the microbus and the clothing store were heated, so it was not a huge priority. Instead, they simply wandered the store looking at clothes.

“Oh, this material’s quite sturdy. It would probably sell for a lot in the Empire.”

The sheer variety of goods on display made them wonder if the owner of this place was some kind of merchant prince, to be able to boast such a huge stock.

“Lieutenant, where will we be going next?”

Itami replied, “Let’s get something to eat first. We’ll be going before the Diet at three, so we should be there by two to give ourselves some buffer time.”

“Then where shall we go to eat?”

Itami grinned, and gave the driver his directions.

“Wait, why are we having beef bowls?”

Tomita grumbled, and for good reason. They had travelled all the way to another world; could they not entertain their guests with something better?

Itami rebutted him by saying that since they had to report to the Diet from Ginza, they would have to pass by Shinbashi on foot, which would take them past a beef bowl restaurant. He ordered eight beef bowl set meals (paid by the JSDF, of course) and then everyone sat down together to eat.

“We won’t be on vacation yet until we finish speaking to the Diet. As a result, even though traffic and food can be billed to the JSDF, we can’t spend more than 500 yen for meals per person.”

“5-500 yen?”

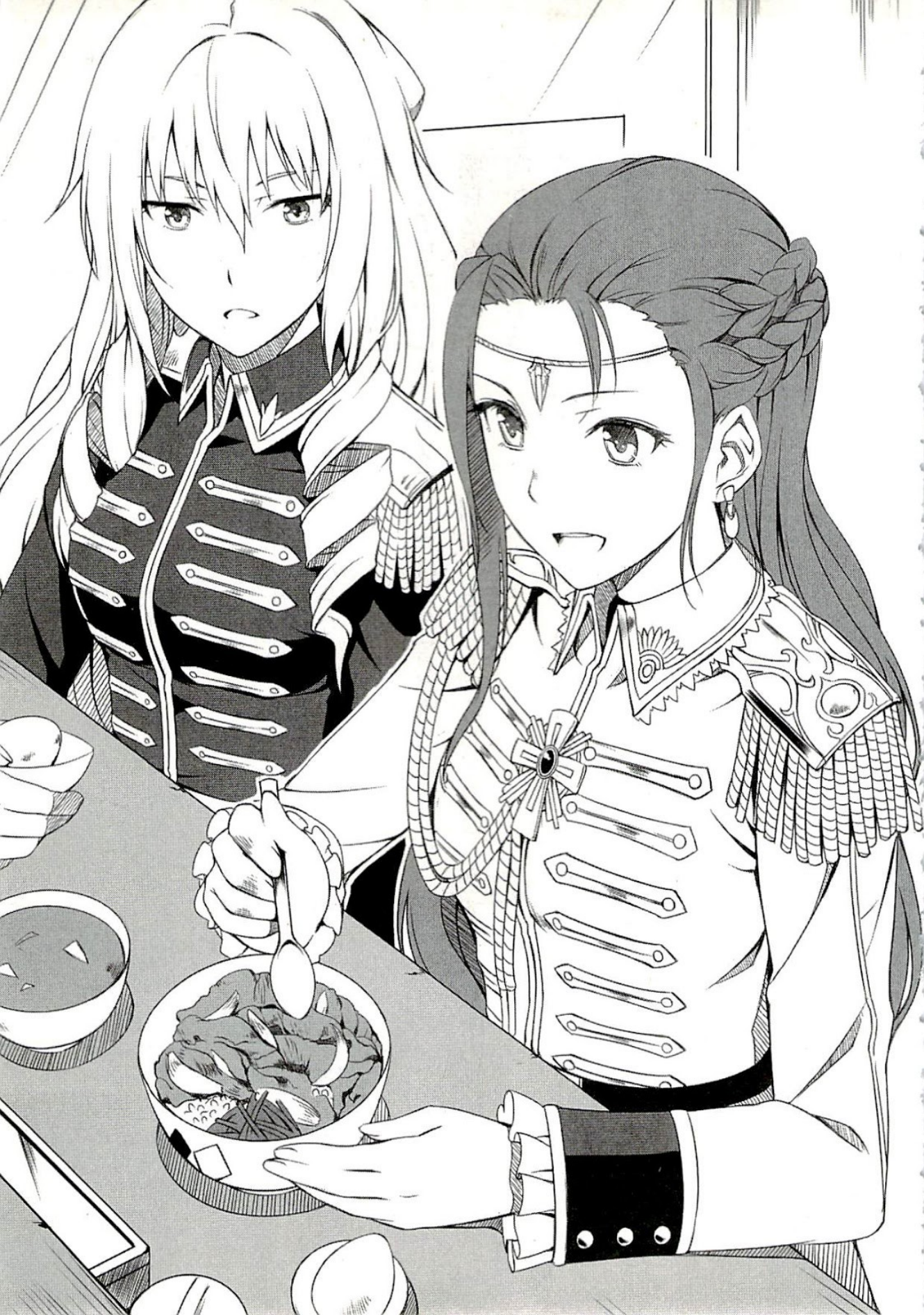
“Well, a single cup of coffee from the cafes here will cost more than that. Beef bowls or soba are pretty much the only things that cost under 500 yen in this area. But we can’t have them eat while standing, so I went with the beef bowl. Besides, it looks like they’re enjoying it.”

Lelei and the others were digging into their food with great gusto. As an aside, they had learned how to use chopsticks in the refugee camp. To Lelei’s group, who were used to eating JSDF-supplied combat rations, the beef bowl tasted delicious.”

“But is it alright to let the Princess and Bozes eat beef bowls?”

“They’re here to learn about us, right? That being the case, why not let them experience what the average citizen has for lunch?”

The high-bred noblewomen in question were gingerly spooning up the beef bowl and egg before swallowing it. Although it was the first time they had encountered a rice bowl dish, they did not protest it, probably because their time in training had inured them to vile food. That being said, they found the beef bowl delicious.



After their meal, the group continued on to the National Diet Building.

Itami, Lelei, Rory and Tuka were led to a waiting room by members of the Diet.

This was where Bozes and Panache parted ways with Itami's group.

Kuribayashi and Tomita followed them onto the microbus, which left from the main gate of the Diet Building and travelled to a high-class hotel somewhere in Tokyo.

Piña and Bozes were not official envoys, so there was no way to officially invite them into a government building. More importantly, on paper, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office was officially unaware that they were in Japan. They had been invited to Japan by the Defense Ministry under the pretext of being "backup speakers in case the witnesses to the National Diet were unable to give their testimony".

After all, their presence in Japan at this point would cause a lot of problems if it were made public.

Once they gained a chance to open diplomatic negotiations, the military's opinions would obviously carry extra weight.

Diplomatic talks, especially those designed to clear up the aftermath of military conflicts, would absolutely require military power to back up any proposals made. But there were also many people who did not know, or who chose to ignore this fact, and thus protested the accumulation of military power.

The Japanese government did not intend to excessively limit the JSDF's activities at this stage, and in order to avoid interference from external powers, they had officially disavowed the existence of Piña and Bozes.

That being said, Piña and Bozes were still VIPs. After all, it would be beneficial to Japan to gain an intermediary for secret negotiations with the Empire, so it was a simple matter to pad the nominal roll of people present in order to accommodate them.

Piña and Bozes were brought to a stateroom in the high-class hotel which was their destination. Two groups of four men and women were waiting for them there.

“We welcome your visit, your Imperial Highness, your Excellency.”

The first two were Councillor Shirayuri Reiko, the Prime Minister's aide, as well as Sugawara Kouji from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was there to take notes for the meeting.

In addition, Kuribayashi and Tomita were present, wearing their dress uniforms. Because Lelei, the most proficient with the Special Region's

language, was not present, Kuribayashi and Tomita would take her place as interpreters.

Piña and Bozes were understandably nervous. After all, a single mistake could ruin the Empire.

Piña had not come here for talks. She had only agreed to come as an intermediary to facilitate relations between the Empire and Japan. If Japan asked her to speak on the Empire's behalf, that would be a completely different beast from being a middleman. Given that the Empire had suffered multiple crushing defeats on the battlefield, asking her to sign a treaty would be no different from demanding the Empire's surrender.

Because of that, she had to stick to her position of being an intermediary. She was so worried about saying the wrong thing that the sweat beaded visibly on her forehead.

Piña felt that "Diplomacy is a war of words", and right now she regretted not having brought Hamilton along with her.

Similarly, Kuribayashi and Tomita were having a hard time.

The two of them did not have Lelei's analytical and deductive skills, or her extensive vocabulary, and although Itami was not a cunning linguist, having him around would have cut out a lot of the trivial details. However, the two of them had to rely on their phrasebooks — as well as the occasional helping hand from Piña and Bozes — in order to somehow push these talks through.

Where could they find the Empire's heads of state, particularly representatives they could communicate with, and what powers and position did these people have?

As for these "representatives they could communicate with", the first choice would obviously be Piña, who made it clear to Japan who they were communicating with. Of course, they would not dump all their requests on her; even being a middleman would be enough. The Japanese government would obviously want to verify that piece of good news.

Next would be the number of people in the first group of envoys.

In negotiations, a single person could not attend meetings and dictate conditions by themselves. These matters would be discussed repeatedly, over long periods of time, with both parties working together to come to a compromise that they could both agree on. This was a long and tiring process, and it only made sense to send multiple people to carry it out.

In addition, they would have to decide how to pay for their envoys' stay in their host country.

This too was natural; after all, diplomatic negotiations would not be finished in a day or two.

The negotiation process might take months, or even years. There was a joke that "Congress does not move, it dances", but it accurately reflected the

process of ironing out the conflicts of interest between both parties. The joke referred to the Congress of Vienna, which only reached a decision because of the shocking news of Napoleon's escape from the Island of Elba. In other words, without any pressing threat, the Congress of Vienna would not have reached a decision. From that example, one could imagine that the negotiations would take a very long time, and as a result, the food, lodgings and dress of the envoys, among other expenses, would need to be taken into consideration as well.

At the same time, since she was accepting the position of an intermediary, the question of bribes came up. Only a child would frown at bribes; they were a necessary part of doing business.

However, the bribes in question would also depend on the opposition's position. Both parties might not place the same value on mere currency; therefore an effective bribe would be an offer of an object or service that the other side needed.

In addition, they had to address the matter of how both countries would speak to each other. Piña suggested sending several scholars to learn the Knee Horn language, while Sugawara promised to take her request into consideration. The language barrier had to be conquered in order for effective negotiations to take place, after all.

The final item they discussed was the matter of the prisoners.

The Japanese government had captured roughly 6000 members of the

Imperial Army that had crossed through the gate to invade Japan. Because there were a lot of them, it was troublesome to care for them, to say nothing of where to house them. The government built a POW camp on an unmanned island in the Seto Inland Sea, and stuffed the captives in there.

The expense of feeding these prisoners was shockingly high, and while many of the lesser troops had died in the conflict, many of the prisoners were high-ranking officers. As a result, their haughty air made them very difficult to deal with, and they only provided information that an officer might be expected to know. Perhaps their tongues could be loosened up with such delightful measures as hot irons, but there was no practical way such harsh measures would be approved, both for humane reasons, and because they wanted to use them as bargaining chips with the Empire.

As an aside, among these 6000 prisoners were huge beasts such as ogres and other demihumans that the people on this side of the "Gate" might identify as apes. Although they were not sure if they counted as human beings, they could speak, and so they were treated as humans to avoid problems with human-rights violations. In addition, several prisoners had been taken away by the USA in the name of "Investigations by the United Nations".

"Our country has imprisoned them as war criminals, and we hope your nation will seek a way to bring them home."

Piña was struck dumb when she heard the figure of 6000. "Let, let me calculate how much ransom we need to pay," she said. From what she knew, it would be a staggering sum, and the thought of it made her sweat even

more.

However, Shirayuri Reiko simply smiled at her answer. “In this day and age, our country does not practice the ransoming of prisoners. After all, we do not trade in slaves. Under these conditions, we would prefer to take our payment in means other than hard currency. For instance, in exchange for the release of your captives, we would expect certain concessions from your country.” Shirayuri paused briefly, and then continued.

“In order to give Your Highness some bargaining power as our mediator, we are willing to unconditionally release a select few captives that Your Highness will select. We hope you will make use of these terms to ensure the negotiations go well.”

And so, Piña learned how the country of Nihon treated their prisoners, as well as gaining a powerful weapon she could use to negotiate with the nobles of the Senate.

“I have exclusive, reliable news that your son is still alive. If you want him to be released safely, then you’ll have to negotiate with them. If need be, we will prepare a meeting place as well.”

Which parent would not be moved by this news?

At this moment, Bozes cut in.

“I know it may not be possible now, but I would like to meet some of the

prisoners. Could I count on you for that? I would also like a list of the captives' names.”

In truth, one of her friends had sent her husband to the battlefield (Ginza).

At first, she had thought he had died in battle, but now there was a sliver of hope she could cling to. However, the news she had now was limited to “Some people might have survived?” If Bozes could give her more concrete information, it would help things. Frankly speaking though, Bozes wanted to run back to the capital and say, “Your husband might still be alive! Chin up!”

Secretary Sugawara answered, “Then, the next time you ladies pay us a visit, we will arrange for you to visit the prisoners in their holding facility. As for the name list, I will complete it and hand it to you before you return to the Empire.

And so, without being recorded in the history books, the first secret talks were thus concluded.

There were two sorts of events the NHK was required to cover as a public television station, but which received low viewership numbers despite NHK's nationwide reach, because the people cared little for them. Those would be election speeches and meetings of the National Diet.

However, ever since the self-proclaimed revolutionary began his address with

“You gentlemen who are in power!”, the election speeches had higher ratings than the Diet meetings, until today.

The reason why the ratings for the Diet meeting had increased was not because a witness was being summoned today. Since perjury in front of the Diet was a punishable offense, most people called before the Diet were careful with their words, which made them boring.

However, today’s broadcast was different.

On one of the Net’s huge message boards, somebody had written “Incredibly hot Special Region Elf spotted!” and in an instant the viewership rates had skyrocketed.

Lelei, Tuka and Rory were present for this event, in addition to the regular councilmen.

As usual, Itami’s lack of visual impact meant that he was easily forgotten.

Still, all eyes were turned to the girls: Lelei with her short, silver hair and her long robe, Tuka with her blonde hair, blue eyes and long ears, as well as Rory in her jet-black goth-Loli outfit while carrying something long and wrapped up. Every councilman, every camera, and everyone in the audience could not help but look at them.

The first to speak was Councilwoman Kouhara Mizuki, from the opposition party.

Councilwoman Kouhara Mizuki proudly held up a large board and looked straight at the camera before asking her questions.

“Witness Itami, I will cut to the chase. Firstly, I would like to ask about the Special Region Class A Dangerous Animal, which we call a Dragon. Why did 150 people from Coda Village have to be sacrificed?”

Councilwoman Kouhara’s board had “150 INNOCENT LIVES LOST!!” plastered over it, to place emphasis on the civilian casualties.

“Witness Itami Youji, please step forward.”

After the chairman called his name, Itami stepped forward as asked.

Because he was in a neatly pressed dress uniform, even Itami managed to look...no, he looked the same as always, but maybe he was just slightly more handsome... well, in any case, he responded in his usual tone.

“Eh~ well, I think it was because the Dragon was too strong, don’t you think?”

That unexpected answer left Councilwoman Kouhara speechless.

“Because we weren’t strong enough.” She, like many other Japanese citizens, had expected him to make an earnest defense of himself, which she would then pick apart in what was practically a textbook formula. The man Itami had been painted as a hero by the media during the Defense of Nijubashi.

However, it would seem reality did not match with the image.

“Are, are you trying to evade all responsibility by saying you weren’t strong enough? 150 innocent civilians lost their lives under your watch; do you not feel responsible for them at all?”

She tapped her board with “150 PEOPLE” written on it against the table.

“Witness Itami Youji.”

The Chairman called his name again, and Itami once more stepped forward.

“Eh~ what do you mean by strong enough? Are you saying that I should take responsibility for the Dragon coming out by itself?”

“My question was directed at you, your superiors and the JSDF, to find out what was wrong with your response to the situation! The appearance of the Dragon was not your fault. However, as the relevant commander on the scene, why did you not prevent those civilian casualties? That is the question I am asking!”

In the face of the Councilwoman, who was panting heavily with “Haa, haa” sounds, Itami grabbed his scalp like he always did and replied, “Well, when I said the dragon was too strong, I meant that our rifles were far too weak. Frankly speaking, our bullets were bouncing off its hide like we were using peashooters, so it would be great if we could have more powerful weapons in the future. Like I said, a plasma particle cannon, a laser cannon, maybe you could hurry the labs up so we could get something usable like that? I heard

that they're going to begin prototyping power suits soon, so I'd like to get those as well. The basic research is done by the national universities, but I think it wouldn't be a bad idea if we developed things like that for national defense on top of providing benefits for everyday life and healthcare-related issues. It's probably not easy to think of good things for military-related applications, but I think the ones who can benefit from new equipment aren't just the JSDF, but the police and the emergency services as well. I'm sure it would help them save a lot more lives. Also, I'm sorry so many people died."

Itami's answer was blended with a healthy dose of playing dumb and playing the fool.

The ruling party members could only grin at Itami's farcical answer, while cries of "This unruly fellow!" rose from the opposition side.

"Does the Ministry of Defense wish to explain further?"

The Vice-Minister of Defense struggled to contain his wild laughter as he raised his hand.

"Yes, about the point First Lieutenant Itami raised, we have already analyzed samples from the creature known as a Dragon. The Dragon's scales are about as hard as tungsten, around 9 on the Mohs scale. They also weigh one seventh of their equivalent volume in steel."

In other words, a Flame Dragon covered with scales like these was essentially a flying tank. The Vice-Minister was trying to explain in a

roundabout way that ensuring zero casualties while doing battle against a creature like this was an impossible task.

Councilwoman Kouhara sighed, having long since abandoned any hope of trying to get a straight answer out of Itami. Instead, she decided to address someone else.

The first person would be Lelei.

As expected of Councilwoman Kouhara, she had selected Lelei, who looked like a middle-schooler, in the hope of using her position as an adult to get the answers she wanted out of her. After her self-introduction, she asked, “Ah, does the witness speak Japanese?”

“Yes, a little.”

Hearing that answer calmed her a little, and she asked Lelei to introduce herself.

After learning that her name was Lelei La Lelena, she began asking Lelei about her life now.

“Currently, I live in the refugee camp with the rest of the Arnus Living Community.”

“Do you feel inconvenienced in any way?”

“I do not understand what you mean by ‘inconvenienced’. Are you saying I am not free? I believe that is the case — no man on this earth is truly free.”

After receiving a nonsensical yet eloquent answer to her roundabout question. In the end, the councilwoman decided to speak plainly and asked, “What I mean to ask is if there is anything lacking in your life, or if you are troubled by anything.”

“I have ample clothes, food and shelter, and my vocational and emotional needs are being met. I am content with what I have. If one continually desires more, one will never be satisfied.”

Councilwoman Kouhara was not quite happy with Lelei’s answer, but she decided to leave it at that. Instead, she went for the question she wanted to ask Itami, which was to say, “Were the 150 casualties from Coda Village the fault of the JSDF?”

Lelei gulped and stared with eyes wide. Then she answered, “No,” simply and quietly.

The next person called was Tuka.

“I am a high elf, belonging to the Marceau tribe of the Lodo forest, daughter of Hodoryur Rei, Tuka Luna Marceau.”

After being asked her name, Tuka proudly puffed up her chest and stated her family name.

Tuka's clothes were a navy-blue suit obtained from the returns section of the store, the result of the shop attendant randomly picking out pieces. However, because of this, Tuka, who would normally resemble a high-schooler, now had the air of a university student.

“I apologize for this question which might be a bit rude, but are your ears real?”

After hearing Lelei's translation, Tuka's face had a “Hah?” of bafflement. In surprise, she answered, “What sort of question is this?”

Lelei replied that it was because they were curious about how her appearance differed from them.

“Yes, they are, these ears are natural. Do you want to touch them?”

With a charming smile, Tuka eased her golden hair away with her fingers, fully exposing her twitching, pointed ears.

This series of movements, combined with her adorable expression that resembled a cute little animal, won the hearts of everyone around her.

Perhaps because of this, a sizable portion of the councillors, the audience, and the media personnel gasped in unison. At the same time, a veritable galaxy of flashbulbs went off, so bright that it was blinding.

Councilwoman Kouhara hurriedly said, “That, that's enough,” before moving on to ask Tuka about her life in the refugee camp. After hearing that she was

amply taken care of, she asked Tuka the same question she did Lelei: “Were the deaths of the 150 civilians related to the JSDF?”

In that instant, Tuka froze, and then she looked down. After Tuka muttered, “I’m not too sure,” Kouhara asked her to elaborate, and Tuka replied, “I was unconscious at the time.”

The last one to take the stand was Rory.

She was dressed in her usual gothic dress, but today, she wore a thin veil over her face. At a glance, she looked like a noble daughter in mourning.

Of course, the veil did not completely conceal her features, but the combination of youth and stateliness combined to produce a special kind of feeling about her. One could make out the slim line of her body underneath her clothes, so fragile that it seemed that she might be knocked over with a single breath. Yet, despite her small frame, she radiated a feminine charm that was easily the equal of any adult. Even non-pedophiles might be ensnared by her bewitching beauty.

One hand was holding some large object wrapped in canvas, while the other was in front of her.

Councilwoman Kouhara took Rory’s black clothing to be mourning clothes, and she thought that it would be the perfect chance to have her attack the government's failings. After all, since she was wearing these clothes, she must have lost someone close to her.

Therefore, in order to draw out a tragic, heartbreaking story, she spoke gently and kindly to Rory.

“Could you tell me your name, please?”

“Rory Mercury.”

“How is your daily life in the refugee camp?”

“As an apostle of Emroy, I lead a humble life according to my faith.”

“And what is that like?”

“In truth, it is very simple. In the morning, I open my eyes and pray. I take life, and then I pray again. When night falls, I sleep once more. After all, I still possess a body of flesh, so there is no other alternative.”

“What do you mean by ‘taking life’?”

“One might compare it to hunting for the purpose of eating, or a live sacrifice to my god, Emroy.”

Because the first word of the translation was “eating”, Councilwoman Kouhara and the other councillors believed it was the slaughter of animals for consumption. Although that would not be an inaccurate description, in truth, “taking life” should have been interpreted literally, as “murder”. It might have been simple good luck that such a shocking revelation was never

translated.

And so, after that question was done, Kouhara asked again, “Was the JSDF the cause of your family members’ deaths?”

Lelei considered this question with a doubtful tilt of the head. The doubt was not about how to translate the question, but rather, given that Rory was an apostle, any family she had should have died a long, long, long time ago. Therefore, that question seemed completely irrelevant.

However, the Chairman’s curious question of “what’s wrong?” interrupted her stupor.

Lelei could only split this question into two parts. She asked them as: “How about Rory Mercury’s family”, as well as “What do you think of the refugees at Coda Village?”

However, Councilwoman Kouhara had originally asked a single question, and she thought that the translator was deliberately splitting it up in order to cover up some misconduct in the JSDF and the Ministry of Defense. Therefore, she firmly repeated herself.

“Miss Lelei, please translate my question exactly as I ask it. Were the death of Rory’s family caused by the JSDF’s response?”

Since there was no choice, Lelei translated the question verbatim.

However, Rory's response was silence. Kouharu Mizuki thought, "Jackpot!", thinking that she had finally managed to tug on Rory's heartstrings. If possible, she hoped that Rory's feelings would be reflected on her face. However, what Rory said next was in Japanese.

"Are you an idiot?"

In an instant, the Diet Chamber fell deathly silent.

"Par-pardon me, what did you just say?"

Kouhara Mizuki asked her question, her voice filled with doubt.

"I said, 'Are you an idiot?', little miss."

Rory turned, her words drowning out Lelei's Japanese translation.

"That, that's terribly rude. Why do you say I'm an idiot?"

"Well, isn't *that* an idiotic question."

As Rory said that, she raised her eyes up, so she seemed to be looking down on a moron.

"I've been listening quietly from the beginning until now. All your questions were intended to imply that Itami and his men weren't trying hard enough to save the villagers' lives. The fact that they survived combat with a Flame

Dragon is by itself worthy of praise. You say one quarter died? That's a terrible mistake to make. You should be saying that three-quarters survived. How can you be a senator without knowing such things? If everyone here is as much of an idiot as you are, it must be pretty tough being a soldier of this country."

"Witness, please take a more serious tone."

The Chairman seemed to have tossed out those words in annoyance, but Rory simply smiled archly, and shrugged. Kouhara, who was furious after being so harshly criticized, tried to stare Rory down as she replied. "Little miss, I don't recall you being here before, but that is no reason to speak so crudely. Is this arrogance how children in your world behave toward adults?"

Her angry retort came out like a scolding for a child. Kouhara was hoping that this younger person would lower her head and apologize. As an older individual, it was the sole leverage she had.

"Little miss? Were you referring to me, by any chance?"

Rory hugged herself as she answered.

"Who else could I be speaking too? Also, why do you call me 'little miss'? Is that the respect you show your elders?"

"Ah, this might come as a surprise to some, but..."

Itami, who sensed the situation going from bad to worse, raised his hand. The elder Dietmen must have thought of Rory as a human, and thus they were treating her like a human. However, the reason he had brought them along was to show them that some things existed outside of their experience, and having these people present in person would hopefully be more convincing.

“Chairman!”

“Witness Itami, do not speak without the express permission of this office!”

“I’m very sorry about that, but I feel Councilwoman Kouhara has made a grave mistake...”

Indeed, there seemed to be a storm brewing between Rory and Kouhara. The Chairman hoped that Itami’s words would help clear up this embarrassing scene.

“Witness Itami.”

Rory bit her lips and stared at Itami before returning to her seat.

Her eyes seemed to be saying, “Don’t interfere with me.”

“Eh~ Councilwoman Kouhara, and all ladies and gentlemen present. We use our age as a weapon against the young, without thinking that someday it might be turned on us instead.”

“Witness, kindly state your point succinctly.”

”Ah, I’m very sorry about that. That is to say… well, to put it simply, Miss Rory Mercury is older than everyone present.”

“What? To think she could be older than myself?”

The incredulous speaker was a heavyweight member of the Conservatives. He was 87.

“Yes, she is.”

A disturbance swept across the Chamber, along the lines of “What nonsense is this?”

Someone even proposed that they ask the witnesses their age.

However, someone else on the panel said, “It would be rude for us to directly ask a lady’s age,” so they had to let Councilwoman Kouhara handle it.

“Then, how old are you?”

“I am 961 years old.”

Even the councilwoman fell silent with the rest of the room. “Is she immortal?” someone asked.

At this point, another female voice rang out, asking how old the other

witnesses were.

“I’m 165 years old,” Tuka answered. The male councillors shuddered, while the female ones swallowed. She was as beautiful as sculpted crystal, and she would stay that way forever, Tuka was a being of overwhelming beauty, radiating an aura of perfection that every other woman would strive desperately to achieve. That fact was driven further home now.

Everyone held their breath when they asked Lelei the question, and when she replied “I am 15,” the men all sighed in relief. For these men, who equated youth to beauty, they would have to seriously rethink the way they looked at the world.

After this, Lelei began her explanation for everyone in attendance.

According to Lelei, the Humans on the other side of the “Gate” could live to an age of 60 to 70 years, health permitting. Most of the people on the other side of the “Gate” were Humans.

The realization that the Humans on the other side of the “Gate” were similar to themselves drew some consternation from the councillors, and it allowed them to relax a little.

Tuka, on the other hand, was one of the so-called undying Elves, and as one of the rare High Elves, her lifespan was so much longer than that of a regular Elf that she was effectively immortal.

Rory was not human either, but a demigod, which was to say she was a divine being incarnated into a flesh and blood body. Although she was immortal now, she had once been a human, and her physical age was frozen at the time when she had ascended to demigodhood. After a thousand years, she would cast aside her cloak of flesh and become a true god. In other words, the concept of age did not matter to her.

After hearing this, Kouhara wanted to grab her head and scream.

Earlier, she herself had said that juniors should respect their elders. Her mouth, which had so proudly scathed older members of the Diet, was now unable to speak from embarrassment.

That being the case, she should pretend to have forgotten it. That was a sign of the strong spirit politicians had. If things went wrong, they would forget it, ignore it, or just make something up. Nobody could play politics without the ability to say up was down and black was white.

“Then, I have no more questions.”

The session was over, but there was a feeling that there were questions left unsaid, probably because the person who was supposed to ask those questions had given up on asking them herself. Kouhara shoved the newspaper clippings she never had the chance to use under her arm and despondently returned to her own seat.

After that, members of both parties asked questions of their own. They were

mainly aimed at finding out about life and culture beyond the “Gate”. Nobody dared probe deeper into Rory or Tuka’s background.

After all, they had taken down the Flame Dragon, so nobody could do anything but praise them. They approved of the JSDF’s handling of the situation with no complaints either.

At the end of everything, Councilman Higure asked a question.

He specifically pointed out Rory and asked, “I wish to ask one who has lived over 900 years, with incalculable experience, who might well be a living god — our world values freedom, but at the same time, we restrict freedom to avoid undesirable circumstances, for instance, stories, artwork and other materials involving young girls. What should we do in this situation?”

Apart from trying to understand the moral values of the Special Region, the Councilman must have wanted to see how mature she really was from her answer.

The witness Rory Mercury replied thus:

“Some questions with no answers cannot be answered even by those who live forever. Yet, the absence of a correct answer does not mean the question cannot be answered. If you want to know how I felt about the complete ban on some culture and art that I could not understand, was not interested in, or could not accept, in the name of preventing the violations of others’ rights or other trumped up charges, I believe that would be taking us onto the road of

discriminating against others. If we define culture as that which is healthy or humane, and defend that decision in the name of justice, once any part of that system collapses, it will cause an unimaginable number of problems for society. For instance, if I drew a line in the middle and erased one side, the next day, a new line will appear in the middle of the side that is left. I think suppressing the instincts and thoughts of the human spirit is bad. The desire for purity and wholesomeness, when taken to an extreme, is harmful.”

Itami and his team were done with the Diet session.

The microbus had returned to the Diet building to fetch Itami and the others. It was escorted by two cars from Intel Branch, one in front and one behind. It was sunset, which implied that the roads would be jammed, as well as the risk that some car might try to ram or otherwise endanger them.

The convoy started and stopped in time with the changing of the traffic lights' colors.

As the cars around them passed the convoy, a car filtered in behind the microbus. It was travelling at a ridiculously slow speed, and it hedged the car that Komakado was in away from the microbus.

“Hm~ How strange.”

Komakado was mumbling to himself, but the driver was tensed up.

“Dammit, this clown’s really taking his sweet time driving!”

He thought of going over the crosswalk or overtaking the car in front of him, but the cars in the lanes beside him suddenly slowed down, making it impossible to change lanes or overtake.

And so, when the traffic light turned red, the microbus left its escort behind it.

As he watched the taillights of the rapidly-receding microbus, Komakado tapped his mike with one hand and gave his orders.

“Command to all vehicles, the enemy’s here. Keep your eyes peeled.”

Chapter 17

The train slowly pulled into the subway station under the National Diet Building, on the Marunouchi line.

The combination of the train station's location and the office hours of the government employees meant that they started to head home around this time.

A lot of these workers had secretly watched the National Diet broadcast during their working hours, and they couldn't help but sneak peeks at Lelei, Tuka and Rory, who stood out due to their eye-catching appearances.

In any case, every single look directed at the girls was like a physical stab to Itami.

His JSDF uniform was long gone, replaced by a gray coat given to him by one of Komakado's men, who told him to take the train instead.

In his current outfit, Itami resembled an average salaryman, but anyone would be wondering "Who the hell is this guy?" if they saw him standing next to these three lovely ladies with their blonde, black and white hair.

It would be hard to say "They're my relatives" or "They're my daughters" given their different hair colors. Maybe he could try, "They're my girlfriends, you jelly?" and given the circumstances that might even work, but Itami was not the sort of person who would dare to say such things.

A kindhearted third party seeing Itami might think that he was part of a criminal organization which kidnapped foreign girls for nefarious purposes. It was a natural conclusion to reach.

It might be possible, but it would also be difficult to pass them off as a group of tourists visiting Japan (with Itami showing them around the country), or with Itami as a producer bringing three idols back to his office. Among these three options, the first and the third would be eliminated first.

If he wanted to improve his disguise, he should make a tour guide's flag and wave it while saying "Hihi~ please walk this way~", taking them to high class restaurants and hotels, and posing them in front of ads which read, "For illustration purposes only". That way, at least onlookers would think this was some sort of unethical tour agency.

Itami had been following the plan to board the train in front of him, and in the instant the door opened, he swiftly darted aboard, as though to escape people's eyes. Lelei and Tuka joined him, and then looked around in curiosity.

Rory, on the other hand, looked afraid. It was an expression he had never seen on her before.

A quick glance around the cable showed that Bozes and Piña were looking uneasy as well, while Kuribayashi and Tomita were beside them as their escorts.

“Yo.”

Itami raised his hand in greeting, and Tomita nodded to him.

“We were supposed to take the bus to the hotel, but we were suddenly told to alight at Yotsuya and take the subway over. Time was tight, so things got a bit hairy.”

“Well, at least you boarded without a problem, right?”

Itami looked at Bozes, who was clinging to Tomita’s arm.

Although everyone expected Tomita to bear a grudge against Bozes, the way the two of them were attached to each other made him think, “Oh, congrats, you two!”

Tomita wore a jacket and leather boots, and he stood tall, radiating an air of masculinity. In contrast, Bozes was a noblewoman who looked like a piece of intricately-carved gold jewelry, but his visual impact was no less than hers; in fact they even complemented each other. The only flaw in this display was the frightened look on Bozes’ face. As a single male, this lack of a romantic atmosphere was the only thing he could be happy about when he saw them.

Piña was not clinging to someone like Bozes, but she stood stock-still beside Kuribayashi, her nerves all wound up. But if there were a loud sound and a power stoppage, she would probably shriek and tightly hug Kuribayashi.

As he thought about this, Itami was tempted to scare her, but he decided not to for fear of making everyone angry.

“They call this the Marunouchi line, but it feels more like we’ve gone into a catacomb. At least, it feels just as uncomfortable. Even if everyone says not to worry, what if the ceiling collapses? What if the lights go out? Are we going into the depths of the earth like this? It’s kind of scary.”

They had boarded from Yotsuya Station, so the train was still aboveground. When it plunged into the earth halfway during its journey, it gave Piña a huge shock. She could not calm down no matter how people tried to explain things to her. After all, this might have well been the most shocking experience in Piña’s life to date. The train car’s lights were bright, but outside the window she could only see the jet black of the underground. It was like taking public response, but Piña had no frame of reference for this at all, and she had no idea where they were headed while underground. Asking her not to worry in these circumstances was an impossible task.

“Are your ghost houses called ‘catacombs’? (This was a new word, so he had to scribble in his phrasebook). Well, between the noise and the ringing in the ears, it’s no wonder you’d be scared. But you know, the Marunouchi line is much better now. Used to be, the train lights would cut out while the train was in motion and the whole cabin would go dark.”

Just as everyone was chatting like this, the train horn blew, and the cabin doors shut.

The noise frightened Rory so badly that her body was trembling uncontrollably. She nervously reached a tiny hand out and tightly clutched Itami's hand.

“What, what's wrong?”

Was Rory frightened like Piña was? However, there seemed to be a fundamental difference between Piña and Bozes' discomfort, and Rory's abject terror.

“The, the underground is Hardy's domain...”

“Hardy? Is he a friend?”

“He's bad news. If we met him here, I'd be snatched away to become his wife. Hardy's been like that since 200 years ago, always, always, always, always...”

As she said that, Rory squeezed Itami's left hand with her own even more rightly.

Her right hand was holding her canvas-wrapped halberd. Although he was not too sure what she was on about, this god called Hardy (since he lived underground, could he be some sort of demon lord?) seemed to frighten Rory into a child-like state.

“So why are you hugging me?”

“To scare away Hardy. Hardy hates men, so if I had a man nearby, Hardy might stay away.”

At this moment, Itami was expecting Rory to suddenly protest, “Don’t, don’t get me wrong! I’m just using you as bug repellent! You’re just camouflage!” If only Rory would say something like that right now, his life would be complete.

Teaching people from the Special Region about the ways and customs of this world seemed like an uphill task, but as a true otaku, he still wanted to hear Rory say those cliched lines. Itami secretly resolved to thoroughly educate her in these matters.

The next stop was Kasumigaseki station, and Komakado boarded with a “yo” as a greeting.

“What happened?” Itami asked.

“Turns out we’ve been followed, and they knew we were leaving from Ichigaya Park. I think they even know we’re taking the train. So far, we’ve got at least two possible suspects for the leaks. We need to take care of those guys following us, or at least, shake them up a little.”

By “taking care” of them, he meant finding out who the people following them worked for.

“And the two people who might have leaked the info?”

“We’ll leave them be for now. It’s all part of the plan.”

“Wouldn’t catching them be better?”

“There’s no need for that. We’ve known they would leak secrets for some time now. Our plan is to have the enemy rely heavily on them before catching them all in one fell swoop. They should be linked to some ideological organization, or maybe they’ve been honey-trapped and made to work for the enemy. They’ll be dealt with sooner or later, but for now we’ll keep an eye on them.”

“A honey-trap, huh...”

“It’s called a honey-trap, but it’s also a way to enjoy yourself. If they reported that they were honey-trapped to their superiors, we would have prepared some suitable information for them to pass on. So they can enjoy their cash, women, or hobbies to their hearts’ content, as long as they keep their superiors informed, they can do whatever they want. And when the enemy gets mad and threatens to reveal the secrets they have, since we’re already aware of it, all we need to do is mock them. Of course, it’s annoying that not everything goes this way.”

The enemy would obviously prefer to pick people who would not turn on them. The problem was that Japanese moral values did not emphasise national security, and given that nationalism was treated as a dirty word nowadays, it would seem the enemy could pick and choose who, when and

where to strike.

Komakado knew that any country in the world could easily honey-trap Japanese citizens, and he laughed coarsely.

“Well, we wouldn’t have to worry about Mr. Itami being honey-trapped, at least.”

“Really?”

“Don’t you think so...”

As Komakado said this, he looked at Rory who was clinging to Itami’s left hand, Lelei who was standing on Itami’s right, and Tuka behind him, who looked like a US high schooler in her T-shirt and jeans. Komakado had not seen the Diet telecast, so he did not know Rory and Tuka’s ages.

“Well because most countries haven’t trained operatives of this age, no, wait...”

If enemy nations started mass producing Loli operatives, Japan would be in grave danger. “No, no, wait. Recently, there have been a lot of call girl agencies recruiting young girls. Maybe we should keep an eye on those...” Komakado started thinking seriously as he said that.

“Call girl agencies?”

“Ah, well, these—”

Komakado made sure the ladies around him could not hear him before whispering to Itami.

These were known to provide female companionship to highly-placed officials who were sensitive to scandals or first-rate businessmen. Of course, the girls they supplied were of the highest quality, dressed from head to toe in branded goods. The actual “transaction” would take place in a five-star hotel, to create the impression that they were family members going on holiday together so as to avoid the suspicion of bystanders.

If these organizations were actually run by some country’s intelligence organs, they would have people record the indecencies which their targets would perform with their partner. After that, they would threaten their target with exposure of these deeds to the media, and nowadays they might even just upload the relevant images or video to the Internet and wait for it to go viral.

Perhaps their targets might still be able to explain it away as a simple love affair if their partners were adult women, but if they were caught engaging in lewd acts with an underage girl, there would be no way out of it. Therefore, anyone blackmailed like this would go along obediently for fear of being socially and financially ruined.

“No way, where would they get little girls like that?”

“Some dictatorships can manage that.”

They could select attractive young girls from their population, brainwash them into obedience and then send them out. People could do anything if they received the right training, just like the way suicide bombers could fearlessly blow themselves up, or how child soldiers could unflinchingly gun down their fellow man. All these things were simple enough to achieve in a country which laughed at the concept of human rights. History also told of women like Da Ji, Bao Si, Xi Shi and Diao Chan, all of whom were beautiful maidens, and weapons that brought powerful nations to ruin.

Itami watched quietly as Komakado whipped out his phone and sent an SMS to all his active officers conducting searches. He could not send the message right now because they were underground, but he could finish typing it up and send it once they reached the surface again.

“It’s a bit ahead of schedule, but we’ll be heading to Hakone now.”

Komakado told Itami of their travel plans as he typed on his phone. However, Rory interrupted him. She was sweating profusely and her skin was as pale as death.

“Hey~ could we get out of here right now, please?”

“What’s wrong, are you carsick?”

“I don’t know, I just feel really uncomfortable, and I can’t calm down.”

“We’ll be getting off two stops later. Can you hang on a bit more?”

Rory’s fingertips sank forcefully into Itami’s arm as she looked straight at Itami, a sincere, earnest expression on her face. She looked miserable.

Just at this moment, the train reached Ginza Station.

Although he should have been in a lot of pain from the way she was pinching him, strangely enough, he felt no pain at all. Itami covered Rory’s powerless hand with his own, and looked to Komakado.

Komakado did not seem to understand what the gesture meant, so Itami continued looking around. Lelei locked eyes with him and her expressionless face seemed to convey her approval, and Tuka shrugged to show that she wanted to get off the train.

Tomita and Kuribayashi were Itami’s subordinates, so they agreed. Piña and Bozes were not particularly fond of the subway, so they did not show any hint of resistance.

The station was flooded with office workers heading home and shoppers who were done for the day. And then a brief window opened — the instant when the passengers on the train had finished alighting, but just before the incoming passengers came aboard —

“Mr. Komakado, we’re going to get off the train here.”

“Coming through~” Itami said as he led his group off the train like a father minding his family. Because he was selfishly going against the flow of traffic, all the incoming passenger shot dirty looks at him. However, once they saw Piña and Bozes, that resentment evaporated. The feeling Japanese had about “not being able to read the atmosphere” only applied to their fellow countrymen. When they saw people from another culture, all they could do was say, “It can’t be helped” and try to be more understanding.

“Hey, wait, what are you guys trying to do?”

Left on the train, Komakado tried to catch up with Itami. Since he was Japanese, the crowd was only too happy to press him back and into the train, so he looked like a swimmer flailing desperately through choppy water before he finally managed to squeeze out of the train.

“This is good too, right? Besides, we’re only one stop away.”

Ginza Station was right in front of Tokyo Station, and they would only need to walk a little further to reach it. However, as Itami and his gang crossed the ticket stand, they heard that the train on the Marunouchi line — which was to say, the one they had just gotten off — had been halted halfway between Ginza and Tokyo Station by a line fault.

Rory sighed in relief, glad to be outside of the underground train station and back under Ginza’s night sky. She stretched her arms out and exhaled deeply. Although the air here was filthy, to Rory it was still better than being under

the earth. She was happy to be out of Hardy's clutches. Piña and Bozes also seemed relieved and overjoyed to finally be above the ground once more.

Everyone looked around at night-time Ginza. Unlike in the day, there were lights everywhere, and in readiness for the fierce mercantile competition of Christmas, the shops everywhere sported a huge variety of illuminated decorations, turning the night into a sea of multicolored light.

Kuribayashi and Tomita had already realized the abnormality in the train stoppage, and as they realised the machinations at work, they scanned their surroundings with wary eyes.

“What does the enemy gain by doing this?”

Itami's questions made Komakado's eyes narrow into a line.

“They're probably trying to prove something. They might also be trying to probe our strength, which means this is a recon in force.”

“They” had already tried isolating and following the microbus, on the hunch that there might be otherworldly visitors aboard.

“They” had even gone so far as to engineer an incident to force a train stoppage.

Although none of them had been put in danger so far, this string of incidents had everyone on their guard. Could it be that “they” just wanted to let Itami's

side know and fear their power? In other words, this was a warning along the lines of “Mark my words, you will not escape the palm of my hand”.

However, all their schemes had failed so far; the microbus surveillance was foiled by Komakado’s plan, while they had evaded the train stoppage because of Rory and sheer luck.

“The enemy must be worried because they’ve got two strikes against them. One more and they’re out, so there’s a high chance they’ll take direct action this time.”

The fact remained that very few people knew that they had changed from the bus to the train, so Komakado was still trying to track down leaks even though his mind was whirling with confusion. Who on earth had revealed that information? He kept looking over his shoulder as a result.

“When you say direct action, what do you mean?”

“Well, for example—”

Just as Komakado began to speak, Rory was attacked. A man who looked like some sort of punk tried to snatch away the wrapped-up halberd she was carrying.

“Grabbing an item and forcing a chase in order to lure people into a trap is a traditional method, but what the hell is that guy doing!”

However, in the instant that the punk grabbed Rory's halberd, it squashed him to the ground and left him unable to move. Itami and the others knew what was inside, and they had knowing looks on their faces as they looked on the poor punk in pity. However, Komakado knew nothing, and all he could do was find it strange that a punk could be pinned under something a little girl was carrying so easily.

Komakado reached out to grab the canvas-wrapped package, and in that moment, a loud cracking sound came from his waist, like a tree branch being broken.

“Gwaaaaah!”

It was an acute lumbar muscle sprain... in other words, he threw out his back. Worse, he might have given himself a lumbar disc hernia. Intense pain coursed through his torso, and Komakado could not help but collapse to both knees, and then fall to the ground on all fours.

“It's so damn heavy, is it a barbell or something?!”

Komakado collapsed on the ground. People around them were flocking around to see what the excitement was all about, and the distant sirens of an ambulance carried over the commotion. At the same time, some people who had watched the National Diet telecast, and they whipped out their phones to take pictures of Rory, Tuka and Lelei.

There was no way the enemy could act covertly with so many eyes on their

intended targets.

And so, the third attack by the unseen enemy was foiled by the sacrifice of Komakado's body.

Because the bills had not been paid, the cell phone line had been cut.

So was the gas.

Phone calls kept coming in, demanding payment of the water bill. Things were getting worse.

Pension and health insurance payments? Yep, they were due.

However, without the computer everything would be over, so the power bill had to be paid, along with the Internet fiber charges. In exchange, there was no money to buy food.

Cereal and soya bean milk from the 99 yen store cost 208 yen for 2 meals (1 meal = 104 yen).

After that, the 99 yen store again once more yielded a bounty of vegetables and rice. This was dinner, which cost 208 yen.

Thank you, 99 yen store, our Japan is such a prosperous country.

Since yesterday, all three meals had been cereal and soya milk, a diet without any variation. However, this meant that the day's meals would only cost 312 yen, so no matter what, this discomfort had to be endured.

“I need to hang on until the winter doujin markets. Hang in there!”

The pen moved over the tablet. Ten more pages, and it would be complete.

But more money would be needed to hold on until X-day. Debts had to be paid, bills had to be cleared, and the new year had to be celebrated. A warm meal would be nice.

“Although I can't do anything but endure this for now, this'll kill me if this goes on. I only see cornflakes in my dreams now. 100 yen today is more useful than 10000 yen tomorrow. Why did I only realize this truth now~”

The empty fridge had been unplugged for fear of running up the electricity bill further. All lights except the bare minimum had been switched off. Heating? What was that, could you eat it? Thicker clothes would have to do, coupled with the warmth from the computer's fan.

The LCD display of the computer's monitor was the only source of light in the house.

“Can someone lend me money~” She'd sent out the email, but all her friends from doujin circles were hardly better off than her. Everyone was rushing like mad to get their work done before the printer's deadline, and they were

racking their brains on how to get money. As a result, all the replies she had received were cold rejections.

Her relationship with her parents was in a shambles, so turning to them for money was not an option. If this kept up, would she need to dumpster dive or sell her body?

As she thought about that, she looked at the reflection of herself in the window glass.

Her skin was rough and uncared for, while her hair was unkempt and dirty. Her glasses were as dirty as a milk bottle bottom and she had panda eyes. Lit by the monitor, she looked like a walking corpse against the background of the dark room. Nobody would be interested in paying for her skinny limbs, her stringy muscles and her flabby belly, even if she wanted to sell herself.

As she thought that, she sighed deeply.

“What kind of men would want to pay money to embrace a 29 year old hag like this~”

An email from a friend appeared on her PC.

“Didn’t you divorce Youji? That was you being stupid, however bad things might have been, at least you would have been guaranteed clothes, food and a place to stay.”

“Ah, it doesn’t matter if I realise it now, I was just stupid back then. Argh, I fail as a human being~”

She recalled how she had gotten married to her sempai in the first place. That had been because she had been annoyed by her parents nagging her to get married.

Her financial situation had been just as dire back then. She had been drawn to her sempai because his civil servant position guaranteed a steady income for him.

She had known him since middle school, so she was very clear that her sempai was a good-hearted man, and she understood her sempai’s family situation.

It had happened on the Christmas when she was 25, on the spur of the moment.

I threw myself at him because I was hungry and wanted something to eat.

“Well, that’s fine,” he said, and then sempai brought me to a nearby restaurant and treated me to roasted chicken and other stuff.

At that time, I realised the power of having a stable income. The roasted chicken and onions I had then were indescribably delicious.

“Sempai, please feed me. In turn, I’ll marry you.”

And that was how I confessed to him while I was drunk. I knew sempai was not the sort of person who would reject me, but he did not reply to me right away like I thought he would. He looked at me, and I had no idea what I was thinking, and after an uncomfortable silence, he replied, “Yes”.

I think sempai saw through me even then. Rather than being “married”, I wanted to be “fed”. Our married life could not have gone well from the beginning.

Even though sempai knew what I was thinking, he still gently said “Yes” to me. Because that was the kind of person sempai was.

In the end, I still wrote the e-mail for help to that caring sempai.

Normally speaking, asking that sort of thing of my ex-husband would be very strange. After all, sempai did not leave me because he disliked me, but because I took marriage too lightly. It was not his fault in any way, I just wanted to return our relationship to how it was before we got married. What did sempai think of me when I asked him to put his chop on the divorce forms?

I thought and thought and thought about whether or not to send that e-mail.

“I don’t have water, food or gas!”

The decision over whether or not to send that email had been like debating a

nuclear launch.

“I’m a really selfish woman.”

After that, she had not eaten anything. Her last meal had been yesterday, and she had grimly held on until now.

Her head was aching fit to burst, and her eyelids were heavy for want of sleep. Even so, she still tried to cheer herself up, clenching her fists and muttering, “Just one more page” in a small voice.

The time was 2335 in the lower right corner of the 27” TFT screen.

It was then that someone opened the house door.

It was a familiar sound, that of a key sliding into a keyhole

After that, the sound of the door being pushed open, accompanied by cold air from the outside.

“Risa, you are still awake. If you are up, why’re the lights out? I thought you were asleep. You must be cold like this, why don’t you turn on the heater?”

That familiar voice belonged to her sempai, Itami Youji.

“Ah, sempai!”

In the end, I still called him by that name, and after that I muttered, “Food”.

What a heartless woman I am...

To Risa, the scene before her was an earth-shaking revelation.

“Sem-sempai, you brought other women back?”

Coming to her house with women in tow and saying, “Sorry, but we need to spend the night here, god, I’m tired,” before barging in was hardly something she thought Itami would do.

Seemingly oblivious to Risa’s dumbfounded stares, he said, “Hey, come on in,” and beckoned the ladies outside to enter.

On closer inspection, they were foreigners.

The thing was, these foreigners were exactly the type which excited her.

“Uwah! A black Gothic Lolita, an elf girl, a silver-haired girl, a redhead princess and a beautiful drill-hair ojou! There’s even a big-boobed chibi, is there some kind of national cosplay event?”

Risa thought that she had memorized the event schedules, but apart from the upcoming winter doujin market, there should not be any others. Itami looked guardedly out of the window in response to Risa’s doubtful questions, and then he turned back to apologize and explain why they had barged into her

house in the middle of the night and disturbed her.

Or at least, he planned to explain, but when he turned and saw Risa hugging Rory and going, "So cuuuuute~" nobody would have been able to resist facepalming themselves.

"Actually, the hotel we were about to stay in caught fire, so I need to take shelter here for a while."

"Caught fire?"

Risa began looking through the recent news on the net.

In the end, she found a headline about a fire in Ichigaya Park. The cause was apparently arson.

After that, the line fault on the Marunouchi line.

And then, the pictures from the National Diet meeting, which was the first time Risa had seen them. It was only when she saw their pictures on the news that she realised that these girls were from another world.

"Hmm..."

With a click, it seemed that Rory Mercury's "Are you an idiot?" had already been turned into a banner. A following had already built up around the girl from another world who overturned the logic that long-lived people were old.

The tweets on the media sites were reflecting messages of this nature.

And then there were the pictures of the beautiful elf and the silver-haired girl.

Videos of the questioning had already been uploaded to video streaming sites on the Net, and the comments and views for them were at a frighteningly high number.

Was the black Goth Loli in the video the same Goth Loli in her room?

She was dressed in a jet-black Gothic Lolita costume heavily decorated with ribbons. Her black hair was covered by a thin black veil, and then there was the mysterious piece of luggage she was holding on to that was taller than she was. And then, there was the fact that despite looking like a young girl, she spoke and acted like a mature woman. Someone else like her would be pretty hard to find.

Conclusion: they were the same.

Then, she compared the elf in the pictures to the blonde-haired woman in her room now.

Her hair coursed down to her waist like a golden waterfall, and her ears, as long and slender as rice-stalks, traced a beautiful curve as they peeked out from between the strands of her hair. Her eyes were as blue as sapphires. She was still wearing the suit that she had on during the Diet question and answer session. Although she had changed her pants for a pair of figure-hugging

jeans, the unique characteristics of her body were still easily spotted.

Conclusion: they were the same.

Once again, she looked at the silver-haired girl in the video, and then at the girl in her room.

Depending on the light, her bobcut hair could be seen as either white or silver. Her skin seemed paler than most dolls, and her body was slim and petite and clad in something that looked like a Native American poncho or robe, though it was the slimness of her neck that drew Risa's eye. Her prim and proper face seemed to bear a constant blank expression, yet it wasn't a dispassionate mask that repulsed people. There were clear signs that she was a living person there. If pushed, she would describe her as a girl who had a detached look on her face.

Conclusion: They were the same.

After taking a close look at the news headlines and reading the summaries of the Diet interviews, Risa suddenly clapped her hands as a great revelation dawned on her.

“So... these girls aren't cosplayers, but the real deal.
Huhuhuhuhehehehefufufufufufufu~”

As they watched this woman with murky glasses laugh by herself, Tuka decided to represent the entire room by asking, “Who, who is this?”

Just by looking at Risa, one could tell she had long since abandoned the look a woman should have, and after seeing the mountain of empty boxes and piled-up books, one would wonder how she had managed to live until now. And all the spare room in the house was filled with intricate dolls, which looked weird no matter how one viewed it.

Rory trembled and asked, “Is there a Hardy here too?” before taking shelter behind Itami’s back. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

Who’s this? Sensing that question coming from everyone, Itami decided to answer.

“This is my ex-wife.”

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“The Lieutenant actually got married? I can’t believe someone actually existed who would marry a man like this! But then again, now that I look at her, they’re a perfect match for each other!” The big-boobed shortstacked Kuribayashi seemed to be saying what everyone had on their mind.

After a long absence, Risa’s house was filled with light again.

The air-conditioner woke from its long sleep and began producing warmth

and warm air. After Itami had transferred her some emergency funds, Risa did not have to worry about her bills any more, and could pamper herself a little.

Speaking of which, Itami had immediately curled up in a corner to sleep after finding a place to lay his head down. For the guests from the other side of the “Gate”, camping outside during travel was only expected, while Piña and Bozes were experienced in the life of a travelling soldier, so they were not offended or disturbed by the arrangements.. Besides, there were ample towels and blankets for everyone to use, and there was a roof to keep out the wind and the rain, so these conditions were not bad at all. In addition, the room was filled with all sorts of entertainment to ward off boredom.

Lelei swiftly claimed the spot next to where Itami was sleeping. For some reason, something seemed to be bothering her. Beside her was Tuka. Rory was also sleeping beside Itami, but on the opposite side of Lelei. By the way, Bozes and Piña were sleeping with Tomita and Kuribayashi.

“H~m. I roughly get the situation, but I don’t want to be caught up in dangerous stuff~”

Risa was muttering to her monitor in between mouthfuls of the bento Itami had bought her from a local convenience store. At times, she would grab her stylus and tablet, apparently to make final changes to her doujin manuscript. It looked like she was going to pull an all-nighter.

“It’s true, chief. Like your ex-wife said, we shouldn’t get innocent civilians

involved in this.”

Tomita had woken up a while back, and he was looking warily out of the window as he spoke.

“Also, was it all right for us to come here after ditching Mr. Komakado?”

The moment Itami heard that the hotel he was supposed to stay in had caught fire, he immediately decided to abandon the injured Komakado groaning from his stretcher in favor of taking everyone and running. Although Komakado had his subordinates to take care of him, it was still pretty heartless on Itami’s part.

“But still, I have the feeling that weird things will happen when he’s with us. Don’t you think Komakado’s pretty weird?”

“Are you implying Komakado is the leak?”

“No, no, I don’t mean that. I’m just saying, maybe he’s one of the reasons for the leak.”

“You mean, he’s being followed or watched?”

“Maybe. Doesn’t matter what exactly it is. However, ever since we ditched Komakado, nobody’s been tailing us. I’m not too sure why, but Komakado’s probably the reason we’ve had all this trouble so far.”

“Still, what exactly do those people following you want?”

In response to Risa’s question, Itami purposely pretended he didn’t hear it and replied, “Come, time to sleep, time to sleep”, before rolling himself up in his blanket. However, before he could go to sleep, he realised that Lelei had encircled his waist with her arms.

“What’s wrong?”

Although the area to his side was a mess, he felt very uncomfortable. If someone peeled off the blanket and saw this, he would be in a lot of trouble, involving some very hard-to-explain misunderstandings. Therefore, he could not lie still despite enjoying the comforts of the blanket.

“What are we doing tomorrow?”

“Nothing. Treat it as a vacation. I want to go relax, so if you want to see something, buy something, or enjoy the hot springs, go ahead and use it to reward yourself for your hard work.”

“But what if the opposition is waiting for us at the hotel we booked, like today?”

“Well, we’ve already booked the rooms, so if we don’t go, we’re wasting it. If there’s a trap, we should boldly step into it like a moth to a flame.”

“But we can go find another place now, right?”

“It’ll be fine, why are you so worried? Compared to that, waking up at 4 AM is far worse.”

By rights, Itami and Tomita should be taking turns on watch. It was 0120 now, and Tomita was arranged to sleep at 0400. After Itami closed his eyes, he drifted off to sleep soon enough.

“So, Miss Risa, you really were Lieutenant Itami’s wife.”

“His ex-wife, Now we’re just friends.”

Risa answered Tomita’s question without looking at him, her eyes glued to her PC monitor.

“But can you really go back to being friends after a divorce?”

“I don’t know about the other people, but to me, it was better being his friend after we got divorced. I couldn’t settle myself down just after I got married, and acting like a model housewife got really tiring after a while.

Tomita looked at the stacks of doujinshis piled throughout the room, as well as the sheer number of ball-joint dolls which filled every available space, nodding as he muttered, “Ah, yes, that’s right” in a somewhat uncaring voice. He did not want to say something that might demean the other party, nor did he want to lie, and thus chose this neutral option.

Tomita picked up one of the books from the pile and flipped it open. His face instantly froze.

“Ahh, you probably shouldn’t look through those, they might not be good for your eyes. Or did my warning come too late?”

As he put down the lovingly illustrated 18+ BL manga he had just picked up, Tomita’s face looked like he had just stepped on a landmine. He followed that up by carefully closing the book, with all the seriousness of a man reburying a mine, and placing it back into the mountain of its fellows.

Note

TFT: Thin Film Transistor. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thin-film_transistor

Chapter 18



It was 4am on a winter morning, and the sunrise was a long way off.

The printer whined and clacked as it spat out the final copy of manuscript, while the room's owner, finally free of the tension that had gripped her for so long, passed out in front of the PC monitor.

Itami gently covered Risa's sleeping body with a magical girl-print blanket, and looked outside, at the world beyond the window.

The lights in the apartment were out, in order to eliminate the possibility of being silhouetted by them, and thus more easily spotted by the enemy.

So far, there was no movement within the area he could see.

Just then, the newspaper delivery bike's 4-stroke engine began ringing through the streets below. A taxi deposited its drunken passenger at its doorstep, and a loud argument about meter fare began. It should be about time for people on the night shift to be heading to bed.

And so, the sounds of daily life returned to the city as the sun came up.

The Prime Minister's Residence

"I'm sorry to disturb you during your rest, but Mr. Prime Minister—"

"What's the matter?"

The Prime Minister was dressed in pajamas, which rustled as he reached over to bring his telephone's handset to his ear.

“The guests from the Special Region have vanished.”

“When did this happen?”

“Around 2300 last night. Ichigaya Park, where they were supposed to stay, caught fire.”

The Prime Minister looked to the clock beside his bed. It was now 5 AM.

“Why did the first report take so long to come in?”

“Sir, I apologize for the delay, but we needed to properly grasp the situation and that took time.”

“Then, what have you properly grasped with your time?”

“Sir, the fire at Ichigaya Park was caused by arson.”

“Who did it?”

“We're not sure, but we think it's probably—”

“What you think isn't important. Who's in charge down there?”

“He’s been hospitalized.”

“Was he injured? Was there combat with enemy forces?”

“We’re not too sure about that.”

“Cheh. Then, are the guests safe?”

“...We’re still searching for them.”

“Are you an idiot?”

“I’m sorry, but everyone responsible is currently doing their best.”

“No, I asked if *you* were an idiot.”

“Sir, sir, what did you just say?”

The Prime Minister scoffed. “Hmph, never mind,” and hung up.

When he took the post, the Prime Minister was already prepared for the grave duty of taking command of disaster management in the event of an emergency, and he was also ready to accept calls which might come at all hours of the day. However, he was also bothered by the fact that the government officials who were his arms and legs were effectively paralyzed.

The cabinet officials under him could be considered the elites among the elites. Going by their individual backgrounds, each of them was very impressive. In terms of their ability to manage and run an organization, they were at the top of their class. However, there were times when a situation happened which demanded immediate action, and a decision had to be made in a split-second. These officials would mutter “Huh? What?” while waffling around and wasting a lot of time, which showed how useless they were in emergencies.

Worse still, they were incapable of dealing with irregularities in daily operations. Although public servants mainly did administrative work, there were more and more cases where they could not even handle things like “There’s a problem in the annual income records”.

That being said, in times of peace, spending more time on these problems was fine as long as said problems were resolved in the end.

However, this was hardly a time of peace, especially since the international situation around Japan was getting more and more hostile.

As soon as the battle conditions within the Special Region took a turn for the better, the nations on this side of the Gate — America, China, Russia, the EU, India, the Middle East, and South America — began sending their representatives with the message, “Let us discuss the matter of the ‘Gate’.”

America was the first country that had openly expressed their designs on the Gate, and these uninvited guests had not even waited for their host to serve

them, but helped themselves with their own oversized bowl. One could say that they were doing as they pleased. In the face of this, the host had no choice but to keep providing food to fill their appetite.

The heads of state in the EU did not wish to let Japan have sole sovereignty over the Special Region, and they had begun imposing sanctions and other measures to voice their opinion. The resource-producing nations like Russia, China, the Middle East and South Americans were united in their demand that the UN should manage the Gate.

The resource-producing nations feared what would happen if the technologically advanced and economically robust Japan got their hands on an effectively unlimited supply of natural resources. It might lead to their own countries losing influence on the international scene.

However, a demand to let the various nations manage separate parts of Tokyo, much like how the Allied powers had done with Berlin after World War 2, was ridiculous beyond considering. After all, unreasonable demands were only used as suggestions for a more sensible alternative.

The main problem was that certain influential groups within the country actually welcomed the increased international scrutiny.

The ruling and opposition parties, various NGOs and countless religions had already expressed their desire to enter the world on the other side of the Gate. They also wanted the guaranteed rights to observe and act freely in the Special Region. The mass media also wanted unregulated access for their

personnel, and even permission to freely speak and interview the relevant people who had been to the other side of the Gate, and so on.

All these demands had come about because of yesterday's Diet session. The words of the girl who called herself a "demigod" and who claimed to be over 900 years old had shaken the world.

The phones were ringing off the hook from magazines, media outlets, talent agencies and even strange religions requesting a meeting with them. One could not help but laugh at this farce.

And so, all these voices seeking full disclosure put a lot of pressure on the government.

The reality was that if the weight of public opinion was not carefully managed, once it was joined with the overseas voices which sought a sharing of power, a lot of previously inconceivable demands might become reality. The international community was like a rowdy classroom, and the UN, in the role of the teacher, was ineffective at maintaining order. Unless the students wrote a suicide note filled with their hatred and suffering, the police would not intervene. And of course, there was no international police in the real world, so it was the same as saying that nobody would try to manage the situation. As a result, the children in the classroom could only make friends with strong colleagues, and ensure safety in numbers for themselves in this world.

The first nation they would need to deal with would be their ally America, followed by the EU, with whom they had good relations. It appeared that

there would be a need to give them the benefits they wanted. In reality, they still did not know enough about the Special Region, so even Japan itself would have problems trying to dominate and develop the land as was planned. Frankly speaking, all Japan needed was to control the important areas of the Special Region. The rest could be left to the EU and the US.

The main problem now was Russia.

Russia employed hardline diplomacy, with their natural resources as their bargaining chip, and their methods had set the EU and other Western nations against them. The EU's interest in the Special Region was largely fuelled by their desire to stop being at Russia's beck and call. Once the EU could get their hands on a stable supply of resources from the Special Region, they would no longer need to heed Russia's demands.

Of course, if this happened, Russia would be in trouble, which was why they were demanding that the United Nations administer the Special Region. To Russia, it would have been best if the Gate had never existed, and thus they were the ones who had to be watched most closely. They were a nation who could calmly sink a cruise liner or fishing boat, if the situation went out of control, they might even launch a SLBM to destroy the Gate and everything around it.

The thing about Russia was that they could not let the EU handle talks with them for fear of giving them a reason to take drastic measures, mainly because the Special Region would greatly reduce Russia's influence over the EU. As such, they would need to say that "we are taking this point into

consideration, so please be at ease”, while also implying to Russia that they would not escape unscathed if they tried to take action.

China, on the other hand, did not resent the existence of the Gate like Russia did. A lot of factors had led to that decision. China was a country which both imported and exported resources. It was a country which had the foolish goal of giving all 1.3 billion of its citizens a happy and prosperous life. It was a goal that had devastated its resources and its environment, and which would still require ten times the current amount of materials and energy to achieve. This was because controlling 1.3 billion people was an arduous task, even for a country like China. Perhaps it was a necessary step to unify the country, but after long years of biased education, the egos of the Chinese people were growing without limit. Chinese ways of thinking, their nationalist spirit, an excess of racial pride, the one child policy which ensured any children would be spoiled rotten, all these combined to create an excess of ambition which could not be satisfied by their current poverty. Much like the stars of the American and Japanese shows they watched, they wanted to drive expensive cars and enjoy affluent lifestyles without wanting for anything. At least, they wanted to, but as members of the mighty Han race, they were forced to live more miserably than the Koreans or the Japanese. This created resentment in the 1.3 billion, and much of this resentment was directed at the inequalities within their nation. After all, they belonged to such a great country and were proud Han citizens, but they could not live comfortable lives.

This accumulated resentment demanded an outlet.

They had no cultural influences to rein in their greed, and their egos were

fragile without any natural ability to protect them. They saw the ones who pointed out their true face as the enemy, and turned their excess of egotism into what they called “justice”.

Dissatisfaction like this had to be vented.

A democracy like Japan could peacefully demand a change in government if they were unhappy with it. But a dictatorship could not be changed by any force short of violence, which was why people under dictatorships often revolted violently. This was the worst nightmare of China’s leaders, especially since the seemingly impossible dissolution of the Soviet Union had occurred just recently. As a result, they desperately tried to soothe the people’s anger, and did their best to satisfy their unlimited desire for more. They constantly told the people, “The future under the Communist Party will be a bright one, the party promises a wealthy and wonderful future for all its people, all nations will revere China as their ancestor and bend their knee in respect.”

Japan could not avoid making contact with a China like this. Therefore, rather than risk messing the situation up, peaceful coexistence was the most beneficial relationship for the two powers.

The bait they would use for this would be the Special Region.

Since China needed to obtain resources by any means necessary, they would take it by force, or if that was impossible, they would try to build an alliance with Japan and beg them for a share of the prize. China was currently at a

stage where they were both guarded against and envious of Japan and their exclusive domination of the Special Region, but in the future, they would try to get closer to Japan. In doing so they would reveal their true aims.

In a sense, it was like crossing a log bridge.

They were hoping for the other party to react the way they wanted, and they knew that trying to force the issue would result in both sides being severely hurt. Therefore, it was only common sense that they would try to change their attitudes and bow their heads while politely asking “Please, may I have a little”. To achieve that aim, one might expect that they would put on smiling faces and surround themselves in an air of congeniality while shaking hands with the other side. However, the situation was not that simply explained. The basic approach China took toward Japan was “If you want to shake hands, step forward first”. The officials of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs were the sort who would respond to overt displays of force with shows of their own, but when they encountered someone who extended their hand in friendship, they would graciously take a step back, which played right into their enemies’ hands. Because of this, China was very willing to incite all manner of small disputes, secure in the knowledge that they would end with a shaking of hands and a signing of agreements. Perhaps the only way to counteract China’s strategy would be to stand up to them with grim determination, and the resolution not to take a single step back. However, there was probably nobody in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that had the courage for that. As the current Prime Minister thought about this, he could not help but think that the previous Prime Minister, Hojo, must have endured a lot of this. “Could it be that letting me become Prime Minister was a trap so

I would take all the blame for this?”

“In the end, the important thing isn’t one’s educational record, but their personality.”

The previous Prime Minister was reviled by the opposition, but he was an effective strongman leader who forced the policies he liked through parliament. At the time, the relationship between the Cabinet and the rest of the government was tense, and he had made it onto the previous Prime Minister’s staff by being his Chief Cabinet Secretary. Although he could have done as he wished with his position, that was only possible with the backing of the previous Prime Minister’s unwavering stance.

The most distasteful thing was that when it was his turn to be the Prime Minister, he wanted to take others’ views into consideration and produce a more welcoming and inclusive regime, but for some reason, his cabinet members kept being suspected of corruption and other crimes, while all the dirty linen from the previous administration was dragged into the light one by one, the party bosses shot their mouths off without grasping the situation, and problems kept coming up in the various ministries. It made him want to give up on the whole thing.

The first problem was: Why had the important news that “The guests from the Special Region have gone missing” taken so long to make it to him?

The second problem was: Why had it taken so long just to verify that information? How incompetent were they?

A few minor errors in the first report were fine. The important thing was that people had to be informed that something was going on. Swift and timely news was invaluable, since at the very least the person receiving it could make the necessary preparations to handle it (both physically and mentally).

Accurate details could be left to the second and subsequent reports. With concrete information, they could make an effective response. Therefore the follow-up reports had to contain more information and clarify doubts in the earlier reports. What this all meant was that the speed of reporting in this incident was too slow, and said reports were not informative. Frankly speaking, the whole thing reeked of going through the motions and it was shoddy work which was done to shuck off one's responsibilities as quickly as possible.

“I need to lecture them about this.”

He said that, but the fact was that in his position as the Prime Minister, there was no way he could pretend that he knew nothing about this. The guests from the Special Region were potentially their key to ending this war, and important factors in establishing good relations between the Special Region and Japan after the war was concluded. More importantly, the three of them had made a big impact in the public eye. If anything happened to them... just thinking about it made his head hurt and his scalp itch.

Therefore, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number.

After a long series of rings, someone finally answered.

“Kanou, sorry I got you up so early.”

...

“Oh good, you’re up already? I was worried that I’d be disturbing you by calling so early, but the way things are, I can’t help but give you a call. Since we’re in the same situation, I hope you’ll forgive me for this. After all, I was just woken up too.”

...

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about our guests from the Special Region. As you know, there’s been a lot of noise ever since they arrived. Our guests were scared off by the noise and ran. It would be good if they were fine... yes.”

...

“Eh? Oh, about that... I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but I only just heard about them myself.”

...

“All right. In truth, I’m really worried about the people handling this operation, they’re a real pain in the ass. I hope you will accept the position of Minister for Special Area Incident Countermeasures.

...

Yes, I'm sorry I need to push all this troublesome business to you."

...

"Yes. Then, please take care of it."

...

Prime Minister Motoi switched off his cell phone and cursed loudly, saving a couple of choice lines for Kanou. "I'm going to quit, I'm going to quit, screw this!" he grumbled as he got back into bed.

The veil of night was finally pulled aside, giving way to the day.

The TV was showing a couple of irresponsible commentators talking about everything and nothing. There was no meaning to their mindless prattle. In order not to wake up the sleeping people, Itami turned down the volume of the TV set. Besides that, he had to tread carefully so he wouldn't wake up the people sprawled all over the floor. With careful steps, he made his way to the kitchen of this small apartment, where he began making french toast with bread, milk, eggs and other ingredients from a nearby convenience store.

Itami could only make a few recipes, usually related to roasting or frying things, and when it came to seasoning his food, he was limited to simple methods like adding sauce or sprinkling salt. Complex seasonings were beyond him. If he absolutely had to flavor something, he liked to use bonito fish sauce bought from a supermarket.

Therefore, to put it nicely, sous-chef Itami's simple dishes brought out the natural flavor of the ingredients, and the only utensil he really needed for this dish was a frying pan.

If Itami had to make dinner, he would buy the cheapest Australian or American meat he could find, fry it lightly, season it with salt and pepper, and eat it without any further preparation. Most of the time, he ate frozen vegetables from a bag, but if he felt like enjoying some fresh vegetables, he would buy a head of cabbage, and chop it up into large chunks. He would usually prepare four portions of rice at a time, then put the rest in fridge and reheat it with the microwave as needed. In summary, Itami did not carefully prepare his food like a chef, but instead chose to cook simply and eat without ceremony. Granted, it was not gourmet food, but neither was it inedible. Itami's attitude toward food was generally "good enough".

After sorting out everyone's messily scattered luggage, the center of the room was clear enough to set up a folding table, upon which Itami placed the bowls and plates for everyone.

Tomita was snoring loudly, having finished an all-nighter, while Kuribayashi woke up to go to the bathroom and then went back to sleep. By the time the

two of them came round, the breakfast Itami made had gone cold, but they did not seem to mind. Piña, Bozes and Rory rose earlier than the others from the Special Region. Rory knelt in front of the window, basking in the sunlight as she prayed. Piña and Bozes, on the other hand, were startled by the TV at first, but because they could not understand the language of the news and other shows, they quickly lost interest, and turned their attention to the mountain of doujinshi in the apartment.

“Your, Your Highness! This is!”

“U~mu. I didn’t expect this world to have art of this quality...”

“Your Highness, this is another world.”

“That is true.”

“...”

“...”

“If only I could understand the words here.”

“Your Highness, allow me to come to this world to learn its language.’

“How cunning...”

“But once I learn the language and return, I will surely translate these works

for Your Highness.”

“...”

“...”

“Uu, umu.”

Itami had been looking for an opportunity to cut into their heated conversation.

“Well...” As he made the sound, Piña and Bozes immediately put down their manga and looked up with shocked expressions on their faces. Rory, having finished the morning prayers she took so seriously, turned to Itami with a curious look on her face.

“I’ve made breakfast, do you want some?”

*Defense Ministry Special Area Incident Countermeasures Minister Kanou
Taro’s Residence*

While Itami’s group was having a Western-style breakfast of french toast, Kanou was having a traditional Japanese breakfast of natto and miso soup. (Kansai readers, feel free to disagree)

His secretary Noji was carrying all the secret documents from Tarou's office with him as he entered the room. "Good morning, sir," he said.

"Your Excellency, this is the itinerary planned for today—"

Just as the secretary was about to open up his folder, Kanou took a mouthful of his miso soup. "Sorry, cancel it all." He said this in a special tone of voice.

"What's wrong?"

"This morning, the Prime Minister called me. We've lost track of our guests from the Special Region, so resolving that problem is now our top priority.

"How could that be!? The Prime Minister himself said that he would be taking charge of it himself and took it from the Ministry of Defense to his office because he said there would be peace talks! And now that something goes wrong, he throws it back at us?"

"Oh, is that your opinion? What a coincidence, I was thinking the exact same thing."

Well, it was obvious enough. The Prime Minister wanted to end the war with incredibly favorable terms to himself through the JSDF's superiority, and then claim credit for that achievement. Although it was not wrong for a country's leader to think that way, it was the Prime Minister's fault for passing off the matter like a hot potato once something went wrong. It spoke of his utter lack of guts.

As he chewed his seaweed and natto, Kanou grumbled along those lines.

Secretary Noji replied, “Yes, it is as you say,” and then withdrew his cell phone to inform various people that the parts of their schedules which pertained to Kanou would be cancelled.

“Ah, Noji, could I trouble you to go to the office and fetch me the data on the guests? Also, help me check on the Prime Minister’s condition. Matsui, go organize a meeting for the people in charge and contact the relevant ministries. Apart from that, ask Intel Branch about what’s going on. Inform me directly if there are any changes in the situation.”

“Ah, yes, sir.”

Noji returned his phone and his notebook into his pockets before leaving, and Matsui the second secretary began calling people in his place.

“All right, then we’ll spend the day having fun.”

After finishing breakfast, Itami spoke to the girls from the Special Region, who were watching the TV. Currently, a repeat of yesterday’s interview at the Diet was airing.

“Well, although you said we would be having fun, we can’t really let

ourselves go, right?”

After the way they were followed yesterday and how their hotel caught fire, Kuribayashi reminded Itami that they could not be careless, given that there were enemies around.

However, Itami shook his head. “My motto is ‘eat, sleep, play, and relax’. Life is everything that happens in between!”

But that’s not the problem, Tomita thought as he tilted his head. However, if the highest-ranked officer on the scene ordered them to “spend the day having fun”, he could not say anything else as a Sergeant First Class, could he?

“In any case, if there’s really an enemy gunning for us, even if we hide in here, we’ll still be in danger. That being the case, we should go have fun in a place with lots of witnesses, right?”

Although Itami’s reasoning was quite persuasive, there was the feeling that it was sacrificing something important. Naturally, Tomita and Kuribayashi were not workaholics, and as young people they wanted to go shopping and travel. In the end, everyone accepted Itami’s declaration with a shrug and a “Well, that’s fine too”.

The question now was not whether or not to go, but where to go.

“Good, good! If we want to buy stuff, we should go to Shibuya and

Harajuku!”

The person raising their hand and shouting a suggestion was Risa.

Her desire to shop must have been some sort of predator’s compensatory behavior — now that she had money after being poor for so long, her habits of scrimping and saving had inverted into a powerful desire to buy things that filled her mind.

“And why should we use your suggestion?”

“Ehhhhh~~~ aren’t I one of your friends? Are you bullying me? Huh? Are you?”

“No, I’m not bullying you. If everyone approves, then we’ll go with it.”

“Woohoo!” The happy Risa aside, Kuribayashi also wanted to go shopping. As for Lelei and Tuka, they said “As long as there’s clothes and underwear” after they were told about Harajuku and Shibuya. Rory, on the other hand, seemed completely uninterested until Risa muttered something about “Black Goth... you look good as you are, but there’s a shop in Shimokitazawa which specializes in this sort of thing. Want to go?” After Kuribayashi translated her words for Rory, her attitude made a 180 degree turn and she was eager to go there too.

As opposed to the girls, who wanted to go shopping in Shibuya, Itami said, “As for me, I want to visit Akihabara and Nakano...” His intentions were

pretty obvious from the names of those places.

“I’m fine with going anywhere, but Bozes says she wants to find out more about this world, so I was planning to take her to a library.” Tomita was simply relaying Piña’s and Bozes’ opinions, but in truth, he must have been planning a library date of some sort.

The way things were, it looked like everybody’s plans would not mesh up.

Itami looked quietly at Risa’s face. His sixth sense told him, no, it screamed at him, *you must not go with her, you absolutely cannot follow her*. As a man, going shopping with girls would only result in a terrible fate for him. If he did not have the resolution and the ability to lose himself in the experience, then it would be better not to go in the first place.

“In any case, we’ll all do our own thing in the morning. After factoring in some additional buffer time, we’ll meet at Shinjuku Station at two. It might be a bit late, but we’ll have lunch there. In the evening, we’ll go bathe in the hot springs, and at night, there’ll be a dinner party!”

And so, Lelei and the others went shopping on the streets of another world.

Itami was moving alone, and after parting ways with Tomita, Piña and Bozes at the library, Rory, Tuka and Lelei set out for Harajuku with Kuribayashi and Risa.

Although they had seen it several times, walking in such large crowds made them feel like being swallowed alive. Lelei stuck closely to Risa, and the first shop they entered was a clothes shop.

“Well, you didn’t have to torture yourself by wearing this...”

After Risa said that, she stripped Lelei naked, removing her robes in an instant, and she had a look on her face like a sexual offender. It was a wicked smile that seemed to say “Uhehehehe, it’s okay, right, it’s okay right?” Risa brought out all sorts of clothes - kawaii-type, gyaru-type, natural-type and more for Lelei to wear, and it looked like Risa was dressing up a life-sized doll.

She put clothes on and took them off, took clothes off and put others on. Judging by Lelei’s expression, the outfit that made her react the most was a simply designed blouse that reached down to her legs (or perhaps it was just a shortened dress), with a pair of pants that ended at her knees. The clothes were long enough to cover up the curves of her body which embarrassed her, but at the same time her pants were made of a body-hugging material which exposed the lines of her thighs. It was a small gamble in this otherwise safe ensemble.

“Hm, but since we’ve come all this way...”

She picked out blue, yellow and pink clothes — colors so bright they could strike men blind — for Lelei to wear. Risa’s aim was to select cute, yet

practical clothes for Lelei to wear in Tokyo's winter. But Lelei's favorite color was white, so in the end she only ended up picking white clothes. In the end, it was a girl clad in white from head to toe who appeared before Risa.

“This is white, that is white, doesn't everything blend together?!”

To counteract that, Risa suggested that she select clothing with extra decorations and embroidery.

In the end, her top was still white (although Risa pranked her by selecting an item with a particularly revealing back. It exposed her slender shoulders and radiated a coquettish charm). Her leggings were white as well, but Lelei ended up getting a pair edged with lace and ribbons.

In contrast to that, Tuka had been happily strolling through the aisles, helping herself to whatever she liked. Although her stretchy T-shirt and jeans were pretty good, she was worried that she would accidentally expose her belly button, and also that she would be losing out if she bought less stuff than Lelei. However, the clothes Tuka picked were all T-shirts and dresses which emphasized her figure, suggesting that she must have been quite confident in her body. Although she was different from the brainless titty monster Kuribayashi, she still had obvious curves and body lines. She picked the color which forest elves most preferred — grass green.

Risa took a look at Tuka's waist, and gave her a belt. She also considered how to protect her from the cold, and debated recommending a jacket for Tuka to wear over her other clothes.

After Tuka and Lelei finished trying on the clothes and stepped out of the changing room, Risa and Kuribayashi went “Ohhh!” at their new styles.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed Tuka and the silver-haired Lelei looked like a pair of foreign models, and they were swiftly surrounded by the shop’s customers, while the interior of the clothes shop had the atmosphere of a modelling runway. The staff realised that they had brought in a lot of customers, so they treated them pleasantly.

And so, Lelei calmly swept a flower-patterned camisole and other clothes into her basket. For Tuka, she had a deep-V side cut dress and other sexy items of clothing.

The people who had watched the National Diet live telecast or the morning news could not help but wonder, “Are these the girls from the Special Region?” out loud as they saw Tuka, Rory and Lelei. As they went to pay for their purchases, the shop gave the five of them special treatment and a discount, as thanks for bringing more customers in.

By the way, each of them paid for their own things. Earlier, it was mentioned that Lelei was receiving a salary for working as a translator for the Japanese government, but Tuka was also employed in picking suitable places for logging and finding water sources (finding water sources was an important job), as well as playing the role of a consultant. Rory, on her part, had been hired as a religious consultant to avoid accidentally violating the Special Region’s religious taboos. As a result, the three of them had a lot of Japanese

yen which they could not spend in the Special Region.

“Next up, underwear! Then the black Goth shop! And jewellery!”

After hearing Risa’s declaration, the five ladies continued on to a shop specializing in underwear.

Elsewhere, Piña and Bozes were headed to the library, led by Tomita.

After seeing the sheer quantities of books within the library, the girls’ eyes were as wide as dinner plates. They were deeply struck by this country’s ability to make such a huge amount of books freely available to the public.

“Then, what kind of literature were you looking for?”

There was a nearly limitless variety of literature on this side of the Gate. However, because the girls were not fluent in Japanese, they could not read the words here, so they should naturally prefer pictures or videos. At least, that was what Tomita thought, but the two of them instantly replied in unison.

“Art!”

Chapter 19

Tokyo, Shinjuku Ni-chōme

Once, this place had been holy ground, but now, it was no longer sacred. After taking the Marunouchi line to the Shinjuku-gyoemmae Station and climbing the metal staircase on the outside of a certain building, one would come to a place where one could find all sorts of rare anime posters, wallpapers, postcards, and even animation cels for sale.

Some people might say, “Aren’t these stores a dime a dozen everywhere, like in Akihabara, Ikebukuro and so on?”

The reply would be, “No, no, no. It’s convenient to you because you’re living in the present day. Back then, Akihabara was considered a simple electronics shopping street, and Ikebukuro didn’t have a place called ‘Otome Road’. It was a time when those people calling themselves ‘otaku’ could still be treated like human beings. At least, until a man kidnapped a young girl, defiled her body with his carnal lusts, and then murdered her, which made the name “otaku” synonymous with ‘disgusting pervert’.”

Yes, this incident happened about 20 years ago.

“Back then, I’d just gotten married, and I lost the election...”

The oji-san in the western suit sighed as he recalled the good old days.

In a wistful tone of voice, Itami replied, “I was just a middle schooler back then.”

Neither of them looked at each other, but instead, they looked up to the building that had once been a sanctuary for people like them.

“Although, I didn’t expect you to come without SP. Why so low-key?”

“What are you talking about, don’t I have the strongest bodyguard by my side?”

“Your Excellency, are you kidding or are you serious? Although either would be kind of disturbing...”

It was only now that the two of them turned to face each other, and their handshake marked their official meeting.

The two men headed to another place. After paying the entrance fee, they entered the gates of the Shinjuku Gyoen. It was a working day in winter, so there were few people walking around inside the national garden. One could feel the crunching of dead leaves underfoot as one walked along the footpaths.

“To think, the brat from back then grew up into a fine young man.”

“To think, the oji-san from back then became His Excellency. That’s more surprising.”

“You don’t have to call me Excellency or any of that.”

After all, they were comrades in arms, and there was no need to act like people they were not. It was a completely different thing from the jealousy of politicians or their fake, insincere smiles.

“At that time, you said ‘This manga’s pretty interesting’ or something like that, and that set me on the path I’ve been walking ever since.”

“Is that so?”

“When I was still in middle school, I was afraid of touching seinen manga, but a certain old guy recommended it to me, and he spent a whole hour selling me on it.”

“But didn’t I treat you to a meal in return? After all, since you were too scared to touch seinen manga, that means you needed someone to tell you what was inside, right?”

“Speaking of which, that manga got animated.”

“Is that so?”

Kanou Taro snorted in laughter.

“And after that, you read all the manga I recommended you.”

“Yeah. Every tankoubon I borrowed from you was interesting. Especially the one where the black gunman had a showdown with the white kid in a ghost town, that was really good.”

“I told you, right? That series was awesome.”

And so, the two otaku spent their time discussing manga, but as the saying goes, time flies when you’re having fun.

“Ah, it’s about time.”

Before they knew it, they had spent an hour chatting. Because of Kanou’s line of work, it looked like he would have to make a move soon.

“Oh, this is—”

Itami gave Kanou a bookstore bag. There was a catalog the size of a phone book inside.

“Thanks. I haven’t been able to visit a bookstore lately.”

Kanou waved as he left, saying “That’s it, then”. But after a few steps, he suddenly turned around. “Ah, I almost forgot. Are the guests well?”

“Yes, they are.”

“You made the right decision in fleeing from the hotel and pretending to go

missing, but that gave us a lot of trouble too. It seems someone tried to reach out to you, so we slapped them down. There are a whole lot of punks who're going to get a good beating. Anyway, after this, resume the original plan."

"What's the situation like?"

"I think it was your previous unit, SFGp, right? Just leave it to them. Anyway, just follow the original plan and go to that hotel. This is a direct order from the Defense Ministry's Special Area Incident Countermeasures Minister."

It was rare for Kanou to use the word "order". Hearing that filled him with relief, because he could feel Kanou's determination in using that word. Since he was giving that order as a minister, it meant that he was willing to take up the responsibility that came with it. If he was not willing to do so, then he would not have given an order, but instead said something like, "I've got something to ask of you" or "I'd like to discuss something with you". Then, if anything went wrong, he could just blame it on the situation going bad and get away scot-free. In that sense, hearing an order like this was something that put Itami's mind at ease, because from his position as a front-liner, he would be receiving the best possible backup. Granted, the word "order" sounded cold-blooded, because it was a command from a superior to an inferior, but when you took a step back and looked at it, that was a realistic thing to say.

As Kanou walked away, Itami bowed at a precise 45 degrees, which was probably the highest form of respect he could show.

The meeting time came, and standing at the meeting point, Itami looked at everyone else and sighed. That was because they were all carrying lots of stuff.

“Ara~ it’s been a long time since I went shopping~” Risa said that, but could a simple “Ara” encompass it? Just looking at the clothes, accessories, women’s products and so on, Risa alone had pretty much finished spending all the money Itami had lent her, but she insisted, “No problem, there’s still the money from the winter Comiket!”

Tuka was also carrying a bag that came from an outdoor product shop, as well as a compound bow wrapped up in paper from a sports product shop. As expected of a Forest Elf, everything she bought was related to the outdoors. “This bow is awesome!” she enthusiastically proclaimed.

Predictably enough, Lelei had bought about a dozen sets of books. “Books are important,” she quietly said.

Apart from that, she was gingerly carrying a box with a notebook computer. Itami was worried, not because she bought a computer, but he was wondering where she would get a power supply in the Special Region.

Rory had her huge halberd to carry around, so she bought correspondingly fewer things. She was carrying a paper bag stuffed with black-frilled ribbons,

earrings, assorted clothing and other accessories. She proudly declared “picking out these things was difficult.”

In contrast, Piña and Bozes, who had spent their time in the library in search of art, were very jealous of Rory and the others, who had gone shopping. Piña and Bozes could not bring any distinctive souvenirs home with them. Tomita said, “They seemed to be looking for something, but they did not find it. They seemed interested in Greek and Roman carvings, but it seemed like it was different from their expectations.”

There was a command center under the Rocky Mountains in the United States of America, built to direct the US Army in case of a nuclear war.

In novels and movies, this place would have a darkened interior, lit by the main screen and dozens of smaller points of light, with constellations of target icons and travel paths all over the liquid crystal displays.

In truth, the interior of the JASDF’s Air Defense Command did look like that.

However, unlike the above two examples, the underground regional command center at Ichinotani — the room that was sometimes called the Situation Room — looked more like a film studio for political discourse. There was a video editing room in one corner of the brightly-lit room, and the rest of it was filled with display monitors. In addition, the room was filled with uniformed officers who constantly manipulated the unit display icons on

the large LCD monitors in response to the second-by-second changes in the situation. Currently, the main display was showing a Chinese plane flying toward the Ishigaki Islands off the southwest coast of Kyushu, as well as the positions of two F-15s that had been scrambled to intercept it. In addition, the location of a nearby unidentified submarine was shown in red, while not far away from the red submarine was a blue icon representing a friendly submarine in pursuit.

There was a line in a certain detective movie about how things would not happen in the meeting room, but modern meeting rooms were now linked to the scene of the action in real-time. In order to help improve the decision-making ability of the active personnel — who were immersed in the action and had a limited field of vision as well as intel — the rear echelon would employ cool-headed operators who had access and view to the big picture to provide command and support.

The Special Area Incident Countermeasures Minister, Kanou Tarou, stepped into this room. He was followed by suited councillors, uniformed officers, and his other support staff.

“Good morning, Minister.”

This location was active 24 hours a day, with people working in it around the clock, but regardless of what the clock said, the standard practice was to greet people with “Good morning”. It seemed like something out of a TV talent show, but it lightened the serious military mood in the air and allowed people to relax.

Kanou raised his hand and replied “Morning”, before he was led to the temporary place in the command center that had been prepared for him, and sat down.

“I am the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ryuuzaki. Pleased to meet you.”

The uniformed JSDF officer who had appeared in front of Kanou introduced himself.

“To be honest, I didn’t expect modern wars to be fought like this.”

As he told Ryuuzaki about his thoughts, he removed his jacket and handed it to a JSDF servicewoman for her to put it up on a rack.

“True, a lot of people think wars are like in the movies, where two huge forces clash with each other for days. But warfare in this day and age can be divided into two main types. The first is police actions mixed with guerilla combat. The second is like the Gulf War, where you prepare before the battle and scout out the enemies’ weaknesses, then once the fighting starts, you take down the enemy’s weaknesses in one blow and destroy his ability to fight. I think the only places you can find the old style of warfare are in movies and in developing countries.”

Ryuuzaki cited the American forces in the Middle East as an example.

In the past, guerilla warfare took place in the jungle, where both sides could barely see their hands stretched out in front of them through the dense brush. In this heavily wooded environment, they concealed themselves and mounted hit and run attacks or ambushed the enemy. However, war was no longer like this. The enemy would hide among innocent civilians and wear suits or normal clothing to hide themselves before opening fire, or they would blow up cars, and sometimes they would even plant bombs on children's backs and turn them into suicide bombers. Sometimes these were called kamikaze attacks, but unlike actual kamikaze attacks, the suicide bombers did not strike at military targets. They were nothing but common terrorists.

In order to deal with situations like this, there had to be a way to tell the enemy from innocent civilians. Then, they would need to destroy the enemy thoroughly. A comparison could be drawn to treating cancer. Among the masses of healthy cells, there were a few cancer cells, but leaving them alone was not an option.

The aim of the police activity was to find where each and every cancer cell was hiding.

The military, on the other hand, would remove these cancerous portions with surgical precision. For instance, if one had cancer of the knee, amputating the entire leg was an option, but such madness was no longer allowed in this day and age. In order to avoid harming the healthy portions of the body, extreme precision would be required. The American military had gone all-in in the Middle East, but the security situation there showed no sign of recovery. Simply put, they had done too little police work in the region. If one began an

operation without knowing what was going on and simply flailed around with the knife, the Middle East would not be cured, much like a patient with metastatic cancer. And if excessive force was used to cut chunks off here and there, they would be censured for involving innocent civilians in military operations.

“And so, in that sense, what we are doing now can be considered to be the first type of modern war — ah, forgive me, I was so caught up in talking that I forgot to put the situation on screen.”

The WAC manning the operations console nodded, and clicked her mouse a few times.

A map of Hakone and its surroundings, along the Izu Peninsula, appeared on the main screen. It started at 100'000:1 scale, but then it zoomed in, from 50'000:1 to 10'000:1 and so on, and at the same time the details on the map grew larger. Eventually, the entire EL display was dominated by the image of a certain hot spring among the mountains.

“This Sankai Hot Spring Resort, famous for its delicious food, beautiful scenery and its open-air hot springs. This seemingly-normal inn will soon become the stage for tonight's events. The rules are very simple: safeguard the guests staying here and prevent enemy forces from attacking. Our men are already in place.”

Spinning icons appeared in the mountains, rivers and other terrain features surrounding the resort, each representing a trooper's position. The ♀ icons

represented the enlisted men, while a second spinning circle within one of the ♀ icons represented an officer.

Kanou exclaimed, “Ah, so it’s just like Ghost in the Shell”, and upon hearing this, Ltc. Ryuuzaki nodded to the operator.

“Then, what are the guests doing? Are they bathing in the hot springs now?! Oi, can any of you get me a view of the hot springs? Cheh, none of you, huh?”

The uniformed officer’s joke made everyone snort in laughter, but it had the effect of dispersing the tension in the air. However, after a service woman mentioned, “This is sexual harassment, you know” everyone regained their composure and tightened back up. The hitherto relaxed Kanou hurriedly rearranged his tie.

“Then, surrounding the Sankai Resort are our country’s top men, the Special Forces Group.”

“Oh, that was Itami’s former unit.”

“Dare I ask how Your Excellency came to know such a man?” However, as Ryuuzaki turned and saw the thick Comiket catalogue on his desk, he nodded and said, “Well, I guessed as much.”

“Although, I would like to clear up a possible misconception with you. The men of the Special Forces Group are not all SEALs, modern-day ninjas or

supermen or other such combat experts. Of course, most of them are combat specialists, but some of them were chosen for their other special skills. For instance, some of them are computer experts, locksmiths, drivers or riders. Some are medically trained or familiar with poisons, or they might be skilled in psychological ops and winning hearts and minds.”

“Was Itami such an expert?”

“Yes. He is extraordinarily proficient in running away from danger or things he didn’t like. His skill in that field was so outstanding that even with a full security perimeter and Special Forces Group trackers, we still could not capture him. In truth, we once ran a fox-hunting exercise with him as the target, but it was a failure because it was too difficult.”

“...How is it that the reports I’ve read are so different from what you’ve said?”

Upon hearing this, the servicewoman present couldn’t help but laugh, while some of the officers standing by the side held their bellies and tried their best not to join her.

“Your Excellency, was this information given to you by someone from the “suits”? If it was obtained by less than legal means, please destroy it, and then tell us how you obtained this information so we can plug the leaks in our security.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Personal information on the members of SFGp is only available via illegal means, for instance, by professional hackers or hijacking experts, but typically, we will add false information to the profiles in case the enemy gets a hold of them. For instance, the standard deception profile will paint an individual as a close combat expert, a psychological warfare expert, an expert marksman, a HALO and HAHO-trained parachutist, a world-class diver, a demolitions specialist, and other details that resemble the ita-settings a middle-schooler would come up with. Am I wrong?”

“Ah, indeed, that was what I saw. But why would you do this?”

“The following is a national secret, but because you are the defense minister, I will tell you. Please listen carefully. It is a joke.”

“A joke?”

“Yes, a joke. Well, it is also a form of revenge on a lazy bum as him, but on the surface, it is part of the scheme to confuse our enemies’ intelligence gathering.”

“Oi oi, is he really so bad?”

“Yes, he is that bad. As a member of SFGp, all troopers are expected to not only hone their own skills, but exchange techniques with their comrades of their own accord, with the hope that through cross-training, they will each refine their individual style of battle. But that fellow is different. Not only did

he not absorb skills from other people, he assumed that he was supposed to be the lazy ant in the colony and ended up spreading his cult of anime and manga within the unit.”

As the defense minister heard this, he could not help but grab his head.

“Oi oi, is this really all right? If the Special Forces couldn’t catch him, should I say that they’re too weak, or he’s too good?”

“That was why we could not flunk him out of the course,” Ryuuzaki said.

If they fired him because he was useless and lazy, then it was a tacit admission that the whole of SFGp, who could not even catch a guy like that, was even worse than him.

“Ahhhh, it hurts...”

The uniformed officers merely shrugged their shoulders and sighed.

Elsewhere, at the Sankai Resort

After soaking in the hot springs and washing off several days of fatigue, Itami’s group went on a wild drinking binge after a sumptuous dinner. Just as they felt they had done enough and should turn in, Kuribayashi and Risa went to get more alcohol and snacks. As the other people squinted at them and

said, “Let’s sleep” the two of them had already arrayed sake, beer, wine and whisky bottles on the table, along with potato chips, fruits and other finger foods which filled the table. After that, Kuribayashi and Risa began drinking cheerfully, and Piña and Bozes eagerly joined in. “I know this is wine, but what is sake?” they said, and they showed a lot of interest in the whisky. Then, Tuka and Rory took part as well. Lelei, who was reading, said “Drinking too much is bad for your health,” but she ended up being dragged in and forced to drink beer as well. As the room got rowdier and rowdier, Kuribayashi and Rory decided to raid the men’s room. “Oi, you men, get your asses in here!” they said, as they literally dragged Itami and Tomita into their room.

“What the...”

The scene which greeted Itami and Tomita was like some kind of Black Sabbath, or perhaps the word “orgy” might be a better way of describing it. Everyone was stinking drunk, their yukatas were barely hanging in place, displaying their underwear for all the world to see. When one thought about this, was it not very shameful? In the end, everyone was made to kneel on the ground and they were lectured for close to an hour.

As Tomita scolded Bozes about her state of undress, Bozes mumbled, “But, what’s wrong with that?” The other girls muttered, “You’re a pervert in denial.” “You wanted to see it, didn’t you?” “You should reflect on yourself before scolding others.” “You wanted to do lewd things with her in the futon storage cabinet, right?” among other things. In the end they chased Tomita into the corner of the room amidst a flurry of thrown pillows, where he had

no choice but to stay quiet. Itami, on the other hand, realised that it was better to shut up and decided to focus on the food and drinks, trying his best not to stare too openly at the lovely displays all around him. However—

“Oi! Itami! I’ve got something to tell you!”

With a *pomf*, Kuribayashi plopped herself down in front of Itami. Given that she was wearing a barely-on yukata and she was sitting with her legs spread, he wondered if he should mention that her goods were on display before deciding to shut up.

“El-tee~ Itami~ Lieutenant Itami, I’ve got something to ask you... well, I need a favor~”

Being terribly drunk, she pounded his shoulders with her fists as she spoke. It must have hurt.

“Introduce me!”

“What?”

“I said, introduce me!”

“Introduce you to...”

“Introduce me to someone in Special Forces Group!”

“Uh, what?”

Itami knew her ambition, so surely Kuribayashi wanted his recommendation to get into SFGp, right? However, one had to be Ranger-trained to join, and for now, the Ranger course was not open to women, so he was prepared to tell her to give up on that dream. However, the words that fell from her mouth were far from what he had imagined.

“Introduce me so I can marry them!”

“Hey, hey, wait a minute! You’re not so easy that you’d go with anyone, right?”

“Course not. They have to be Special Forces, and they have to be single!”

“But the way you’re talking about it, you aren’t taking the guy’s feelings into consideration, right? Although more than half of the guys are single...”

“Isn’t that OK then? When you think about it, a normal woman can’t handle the duties of being a proper wife to people who go on dangerous missions and spend almost every day outside. But I’m perfect for that! I’ve got a small body and I’m a powerhouse. I’m pretty and I’m lively and I have a cheerful personality. I have a close combat badge, so they don’t have to hold back in domestic squabbles. And I’m a battle-tested, combat proven veteran! And then there’s these boobs! Even if they have to come back with wounded hearts from missions that nobody knows of and which they won’t be praised for, my boobs will heal their bodies and minds!’

“You call them boobs, but those are just lumps of muscle.”

“Hell no! My girls are 40% muscle, 60% fat, and they’re 92 cm across. They won’t sag even if I lie down, they’re firm and fill the hand, and they’re as bouncy as rubber!”

A cat-like expression crept across Kuribayashi’s face as she ranted, and she proudly thrust her pert pectorals forward. “How about them?” she shouted, as though she were about to fire her oppai missiles. Although Itami was transfixed for by them for a moment, he quickly recovered and looked up and to the right at the ceiling before muttering a reply.

“Well, er, the members’ love lives are a pretty serious matter, I’ll let the people on top know about it. Rather than marry a foreigner of dubious origin, marrying a local would cause fewer problems and it would help out their prospects. I mean, you’re earnest, pretty, curvy, and you’ve got the right way of thinking. If I can, I’ll try and hook you up.”

“Awesome!” Kuribayashi shouted joyfully as she threw her hands up in a “banzai” pose. Suddenly, an intense pain shot through Itami’s head.

With a *dong* sound, a smell of metal spread bitterly through his nose, and his vision went dark. How strong had that punch been?

“Ah, I accidentally hit the el-tee.”

As his consciousness faded, Itami thought he heard “Well, it’s okay for him

to sleep like this, right?” as he gave up his struggling and let his consciousness drift away.

After they detected the unidentified armed men nearing Sankai Resort, the silent battle began.

The Situation Room’s central display showed the progress of the battle around Sankai Resort. Several analysts were huddled around the terminals facing the commander as they sorted through the information from spy satellites and disguised aerial drones while they muttered softly to themselves.

“Three heat sources, north-north east, on the upland. Archer, they’re on your 10 to 11.”

“This is Archer, target sighted.”

“Procedure 03. Got it?”

“Understood.”

The Special Forces Group’s history was short, and they were in the dark regarding how they should handle these low-intensity, unconventional operations. After trial and practice, followed by revisions and refinements, they settled on the Master-Servant system. In other words, they would pair a

rear echelon operator (the Masters) with frontline combatants (the Servants).

Currently, there were seven of these pairs, codenamed Saber, Archer and so on. The naming scheme was influenced by the fervent preaching of a certain person.

“Lancer, shift to Point Three.”

“This is Lancer, understood.”

“Caster, Procedure 02. Rider is moving from your 3 to 4. Hold fire.”

“This is Lancer, we’ve been mired in mud. Will be late to Point 3 by 1 second.”

“Move fast.”

The tide of battle was swiftly turning in the Special Forces’ favor.

They used the latest equipment, which revealed their enemy’s positions to them, so they did not have to worry about the enemy’s numbers.

With the enemy unable to sense their presence, they swiftly picked the enemy off one by one.

The only way to effectively do battle with the SFGp would be with a skilfully deployed combination attack. However, while there were three enemy groups

in the area, all three of them were acting independently. It was almost as though they were from different organizations.

Even an amateur to warfare like Kanou could tell from the screen that the enemy's movements were extremely confused, and he turned to Ryuuzaki to discuss the enemy's motivations.

“What the hell are they thinking? They're a complete mess. They should know how tight our security here is.”

The lead enemy group turned tail after being beaten badly, and then the next group made their run. The way they were advancing was as though they didn't know the first group had just been beaten up.

“Logically speaking, it is possible that the enemy did not expect us to have such heavy defenses, and thus they took heavy losses. The other possibility is that they now understand our combat strength and they wish to complete their objective regardless of losses.”

“Enemy Group A has taken over 10 casualties, they are falling back.”

“Group B just fell back to reorganize, the real attack will be coming soon.”

“Group C is not moving, they must be preparing themselves.”

“Could it be that the three enemy groups are opposed to each other?”

While they were discussing this, Kanou was wondering if the enemies' actions were political in nature. War was a form of politics, and there was no form of warfare on earth that was unrelated to politics. Victory in battle was determined on the political level. There were times when even a lost battle could lead to political victory. However, even with that in mind, the enemies' actions seemed utterly pointless. After all, the enemy knew they were fully prepared for them, and yet they were mounting such a daring attack. It was like trying to break a rock with a thrown egg.

Kanou clicked his tongue, because he did not have enough information to come to a decision.

The best historical example of this dissonance was how skilled generals who knew nothing about politics blindly tried to achieve victory without heed for the political landscape, which eventually led to the downfall of Japan. These people hated politics and were in love with the aura of all things military. They believed strategy and tactics were despicable and longed to show their martial spirit in direct combat. However, the truth was that this was just stubborn valor. The government could not be divorced from the military, because in truth, politics and military matters were two sides of the same coin, and blindly cleaving to either of them was a bad thing. However, Japan was now filled with overly-diplomatic politicians who knew nothing about military matters, and Kanou felt this would someday lead to the end of Japan. That was how it was when you had people who stubbornly looked down on the military and pursued peace at any cost while being guided by emotions as opposed to logic.

“Could you help me investigate the identities of the enemy? I have a bad feeling about this.”

Kanou’s request made Ltc. Ryuuzaki frown.

“If the enemy has retreated, that would be fine, but hostilities have not fully ceased yet.”

“But there should be a way, right? For example, you can’t disguise one’s race.”

For instance, countries like China or Russia were intensely nationalistic. In order to ensure the absolutely loyalty of their operatives, they would not use men from another country. Even on the rare occasion that they did otherwise, they would not let them become part of such a sensitive operation.

If they were Chinese, then it would be easier for them to blend in, since they were Asians like the Chinese.

“Colonel, Saber is near two of the enemy bodies. Please allow us to advance and verify.”

After receiving his subordinate’s suggestion, he ordered Saber to inspect the corpses.

While waiting for a reply, Ryuuzaki turned to Kanou.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Ah? Political problems, of course. I *am* a politician, after all.”

“But, what does that have to do with investigating enemy bodies?”

“This is Saber. I’ve just inspected the enemy corpses. Something’s strange here. Permission to use a light.”

“Denied, it will reveal your location to the enemy. In this terrain, any light from you can be seen out to two clicks away.”

“What did you say was strange?”

Kanou practically snatched the mike away to speak.

“Judging by the shape of the enemy’s faces, they don’t seem like Asians.”

As Kanou heard this, a chill ran down his spine.

“Sorry, but please verify their identities. It is crucial that we know where the enemy came from.”

Ryuuzaki angrily snatched the mike away from Kanou, but after a brief silence, he shook his head and spoke hoarsely.

“Saber, permission granted to use light. But work fast. After you’re finished, immediately fall back.”

“This is Saber, the enemies are a black man and a white man!!”

If the enemy were Chinese or Russian, there was no way they would mix black and white people in a combat unit. As he heard the report, Kanou made a call to the Prime Minister’s office.

Note

1. Shinjuku 2-chome: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinjuku_Ni-ch%C5%8Dme

Chapter 20



“Mister, Mister President, how did you obtain this data?”

“Motoi, the question is not how I got it, but what will be done with it. Am I wrong?”

“N-no, you’re absolutely correct.”

There was a pile of faxed documents from America beside Japanese Prime Minister Motoi, whose forehead was covered in beads of greasy sweat. These Japanese documents detailed the secret donations, corruption, and bribery committed by the members of his cabinet. Although this information came from America, the contents suggested that they had been produced locally.

It had been only two months since the cabinet was convened. The conservative councillors were already asking hard questions about the deployment of the JSDF through the “Gate”. Then there was the ugly news like the corruption of cabinet members, the injustices they committed, and the suicide of one of the current ministers. All of these together made Motoi break out in goosebumps.

If these documents were released under these conditions, Motoi’s tenure would end here.

“Fortunately, our investigative agencies managed to intercept these documents before they reached the editor of the morning news.”

“Thank you very much, Mister President.”

“Oh, think nothing of it, we’re all friends here, aren’t we? That’s the proof of it, right there.”

“Even so, I must still thank you for your kindness. I owe you a debt of honor.”

“Well, about that... actually, I had a request for you, Motoi.”

“What would that be?”

“I heard that there are some high-ranking guests from the Special Region in Japan, no? I was hoping to invite Her Imperial Highness to visit the United States by any means necessary.”

“How did you come to know about that?”

“How do you think those documents came to be on your desk, Motoi?”

All Motoi felt was despair born of the grief that national secrets had been so easily leaked.

This situation was basically like showing your opponent your entire hand in a card game.

“If that was what you wanted, you should have told us. I would have gladly relayed your invitation to our guests. I will immediately pass it on when it is ready.”

“No, no, there is no need to worry yourself. I planned to extend the invitation directly.”

“And by directly you mean—”

“Directly. I have already sent my agents to bring word to them.”

“Is that so, but in that case, you will only be able to meet tomorrow. The guests are to return to the Special Region tomorrow. Were you not aware of that?”

“That won’t do, Motoi. When you invite a lady guest to your home, if you don’t treat them poorly enough that they want to go home, I’m sure they’ll enjoy themselves thoroughly in the party to come. I believe that moment of joy will make the perfect going-home present. Don’t you think they would agree?”

“But, Mr. President, it is midnight here in Japan. The guests must be resting.”

“No, no, good news must be delivered right away, even if you have to get them up to do it. I believe the guests will joyfully agree, with help from your side, that is.”

“That makes no sense!”

“That just won’t do, Motoi. You can’t be shy and timid around women. Even

at the risk of being scolded for being insensitive, one must still bravely forge forward. After all, the willingness to use forceful means on occasions is the key to success. I know you Japanese feel that reservedness is a virtue, but I feel that is your greatest weakness. Perhaps you think I am unfairly criticizing you, but do bear in mind that if you continue down this path, you will gain nothing of value. As a host who is expected to entertain guests, providing too little entertainment will only upset everyone. Which is why I'm asking, what exactly should be done if that happens?"

"I thank you for your valuable insights, but I am afraid your methods are not compatible with our national sentiments."

"Is that so? Then I shall directly order my agents to directly present my invitation to the guests from the Special Region. However, your bodyguards are quite something. So far, we have not yet been able to make contact with the guests. What should we do, Motoi? I trust you still remember the proof of our friendship?"

That "proof" was obviously referring to the incriminating documents sitting on his desk. The Americans had him firmly by the balls and he would have to give in to them. Even so, he had to minimize the damage done. That was his duty as Prime Minister. Therefore, Motoi thought as hard as he could about his present circumstances. He thought about the situation, what cards he had to play, and what tricks he could pull before giving his final answer.

"...All right, but all I can promise you is the removal of the security. If anything happens to the guests, or if they disappear, I trust you won't blame

me for that?”

“Of course. My country’s agents are very capable. They will take good care of our guests.”

Good, he’d gotten the promise.

As Motoi thought about the American President, who was acting like he’d won this round, he couldn’t help but feel the need to avenge himself on him somehow. He had made these concessions to avoid opening up fatal weaknesses in the US-Japan relationship, but it also meant that he had a chance to foil the President’s plan and reverse their situation. However, the moment he decided to do that, it would mean the rest of his political life would be a lost cause. But then again, when you looked at it a certain way, this Cabinet was riddled with holes, and since it was filled with rot anyway, he had no qualms about putting it to the torch and going out with a bang.

“Then, I hope you will take them safely, Mister President. Please have a good rest.”

“Of course we will, Motoi. I’m glad you said that. Have a good rest. Oh, I’m about to have lunch.”

The American President hung up. He seemed to be in a good mood.

“Terminate? What do you mean, terminate the security operation for the guests?!”

Kanou was shouting at the person on the other end of the connection.

Even if it was the Prime Minister himself, Kanou’s tone did not sound like he cared who the other party was. The orders he had just received had left him in disarray.

Motoi, on the other end of the line, briefly relayed the intentions of the President of the United States. If they abided by Motoi’s words, it meant that they would be allowing enemy armed forces to take away their guests. As he watched Kanou gripping the handset in silence, Lt. Ryuzaki turned to his subordinates to order them to obey the Prime Minister.

“The Grail is broken. Repeat, the Grail is broken. All teams cease combat operations and fall back to the designated points.”

Nobody would be pleased to be ordered to give up on a job that had been going very well. But the JSDF troopers had been trained to execute an order upon reception.

No matter what each of them thought, their training had already taken over their bodies. They fell back by leaps and bounds, covering each other as they abandoned their mission.

And so, the points of light on the monitor stood down from their defensive posture and moved westward.

“What’s going on?”

Kanou had not hung up, and he asked that question angrily. Therefore, Motoi answered him, “I’m sorry, Mr. Kanou. I’m not happy about it either. However, they have their hands on the ugly news about the cabinet members. Our regime is doomed for sure.”

“So in order to keep yourself in power, you’ll give up everything else?”

“I never said that, it is absolutely not the case. Fortunately, I never promised the President anything like that. I only said I would withdraw the guards. I never guaranteed that I would hand our guests over to the US government. Although I’m not too sure whether it’ll turn out that way, I’m going to resign my position. I was stuck with a lousy hand anyway, and once I’m gone, how valuable do you think those secrets they’re holding will be?”

“You... resign... Motoi, do you know what you’re doing? Your career as a politician will be over.”

“That’s fine. Besides, I’ll be leaving my name in the history books, so I’m glad that I made it this far. Then, Kanou, I’ll be leaving the future of Japan to you.”

Motoi’s final words sounded like he was weeping, and the grinding of teeth that Motoi heard from Kanou suggested he was not happy at all that it had turned out this way.

Wars were not just fought on the battlefield, they were also fought in the meeting room, the Diet, and in the Prime Minister's Office. War was just a thing that changed depending on the theater that it occurred in. In this way, Motoi had lost his war. However, even in his loss, he revealed that he had the guts to not accept a complete defeat just like this.

“That... idiot. He was a coward, but he was still trying to look cool until the end.”

Kanou bit his lip and slowly hung up the phone.

Itami woke from his dreams.

In the corner of his dim vision, he saw an unfamiliar ceiling. Normally speaking, he would not be awake at this hour. He had passed out after being hit on the head and then fallen asleep, which was why he had woken up like this. In truth, he would have liked to be able to sleep until daybreak, but maybe it was because he had been knocked unconscious that he had woken up so soon. In any case, it was far too early to wake up.

When he raised his head and looked around, the first thing he saw were the female members of the group sleeping together, covered in blankets. Surprisingly enough, they were not in a drunken heap, but were simply sleeping normally.

There was a window in the depths of the resort room, to allow guests to enjoy the scenery outside, and by the window was a chair.

On the chair was a person.

He heard the sound of ice cubes swirling in a glass as someone poured an amber fluid into it. That someone was soaking in the moonlight, luxuriating in the scenery outside.

“Haa~”

Slow, lazy breathing. Slightly hurried breathing.

Flushed cheeks. Legs so slender and fine they looked like they were about to snap.

The person sitting there was Rory Mercury.

She was not wearing her usual black gothic lolita priestess' outfit, but a cotton kimono. Her limbs stuck out of the garment, and her long hair which reached down to her waist swayed in the wind. Her skin was spotless. As he watched her, he imagined that he was spying on a young girl having fun by herself. However, it was because he was a man that this taboo act excited him. Itami's attention was thus seized, never to be released. Her pupils shone lewdly. Her vacant gaze floated through the air. She moaned softly and sweetly, and her powerless eyes lazily looked into Itami's.

“?”

Rory did not seem frightened by the way Itami was looking at her. Rather, her expression seemed to say, “You saw it, didn’t you?” She smiled gently, and then laughed quietly. After that, a wicked, playful look crossed her face, and she extended a slender finger on her left hand. “Come,” she said as she beckoned him over. Itami felt like he had been hypnotized.

While Itami was thinking about whether to move, his body had already made the decision for him. His doubts and his hesitation were wiped away instantly. Of course, it was only natural that he would be this way. But as he stood, he felt a heavy weight around his waist.

That was because someone was holding on to it.

Because of this weight, Itami snapped out of his daze, and his consciousness returned to him.

He pretended he didn’t hear Rory going “Cheh!” and finally found out who was holding on to him.

It was Lelei.

Itami carefully disentangled the arms that were holding him, carefully covered her up with a blanket, and then headed toward Rory.

Itami did not know where the whiskey on the side table had come from, or

when the glasses or ice had appeared there. The way Rory bathed in the moonlight while holding a slightly trembling glass looked like she had come out of a picture. Regretfully, she looked far too young. If she were 20 or so, a lot of men would want to come near her. As a demigod, her physical age was fixed. “Is it a shame not to be able to grow up?” Itami asked.

Rory turned to face him.

“Of course not. Once I ascend to divinity, I can change my form at will... but in exchange, I will lose the pleasures of the flesh.”

“Isn’t that boring?” Itami asked as he took a glass, added some ice to it, and then poured roughly half an inch of whiskey into it.

Rory lightly bit her lip and stared at Itami.

“There seem to be people fighting near this place.”

How did she know this? As he thought about it, Itami remembered what had happened in Italica, the way the spirits of the war dead passed through Rory’s body to go to the god she believed in. When that happened, her body would react with sexual excitement. Her sensual writhing from back then had been seared into his mind. Now that he thought about it, perhaps the hot breaths she was exhaling were not entirely due to the alcohol.

“I couldn’t sleep at all because of that, what’s going on out there, anyway?”

“Even if you ask me, it’s not like I can tell-”

“It’s like being tortured, Youji, hurry up and think of something!”

“Think of something? What are you saying?”

By now, Itami was too nervous to speak clearly.

“You won’t get it if I don’t say it?”

“Ahhh, in our country’s laws, there’s something called the Child Welfare Protection Act, so if I touch a kid, I’m doomed.”

“Ara~ so I’m a child, then?”

“You, you look like one, everyone in the world would think so too.”

Rory made a show of looking around, and then said, “I don’t see everyone in the world looking”. Then, she placed her lips next to Itami’s ears and whispered “And even if we ended up in that kind of relationship, I wouldn’t go around talking about it.”

“Ah, but... it’s really not a good idea...”

“Kukuku... do I really look like a child?”

Rory’s liquid eyes pierced Itami’s soul. The tiny, dextrous tip of her moist

tongue played in the gap between her pink lips. Under Rory's skilled hands, Itami was little more than a child. She knew exactly how to manipulate a man's heart, and she was very experienced in that field. She did not need an ample bosom or a slender waist to seduce a man; they were nothing more than decorations. Leaving lechers aside, there was no doubt that Rory could easily charm anyone.

“Really, am I a child?”

He couldn't do this!

Run, run, run! Alarm bells were ringing in Itami's head. However, his body betrayed him. Rory drew close enough that he could hear the rustling of her clothes, and slowly climbed up onto Itami's lap. She skilfully used her shoulders, back and waist to press as much of her left forehead into Itami's chest as possible. The movements of her hands made his heart beat harder, and the slight pain of her fingers digging into him felt incredibly good. After this sensual assault, Rory breathed warmly into Itami's ear, and then she whispered two or three sentences into his ear, which put him on the ropes. The proof of that was the fact that his hands were starting to go to her waist.

At this moment, if she wanted to deliver the finishing blow, she could softly whisper “Hold me”, or playfully say, “Hey, let's have some fun”. Which approach she chose was up to her. Catching the prey, removing all resistance, and then, the feast. Just as she was certain victory was within her reach, the loud ringing and vibration of a mobile phone interrupted her.

This was probably what they meant by the word, “Cockblocked”. It was like pouring a basin of cold water over them, and all her effort was wasted.

What is this, Rory asked with her eyes, and so, Itami began explaining what a mobile phone was.

“It doesn’t know how to pick the right time and place, that useless thing.”

The angry Rory slid off Itami’s knee and left. Itami thought he could see a black aura rising up from her back, and he thought, “I’m saved”. After he got his breathing under control, he picked up the mobile phone he had placed in a pocket. He took a look at the caller: on the name field were the two words “His Excellency”.

Kidel Heidegger had never heard of Japan’s freshly founded Special Forces Group being so strong, and he clicked his tongue.

Heidegger had come from the Marines, but under the CIA, all he did nowadays was clandestine activities. Because of that, it had been a long time since he had taken part in combat. The US army’s fighting style relied on overwhelming firepower, raining bullets on their enemies’ heads like sand and attacking with vast quantities of ammunition. If the enemy hid in a building, they would chuck in a grenade. If they hid behind a wall in ambush, they would blow away both the wall and the enemy in one shot. The doctrine they had learned in officer school was simple and plain — attack the enemy

with six times his amount of firepower. That was focused in his mind. However, they could not do this during CIA missions. This was because CIA missions usually took place in locations where such brutal methods were not viable. For instance, they might take place in peaceful streets, in residential areas and sometimes in the commercial areas. They could not use guided missiles or rockets like in the military, and of course, there would be no supporting artillery fire. What weapons they had were basically technical skill combined with teamwork, and their tactics were to swiftly locate the enemy, silently approach to an ideal distance, and defeat him quickly without giving him any time to react. However, these tactics were based on extensive information and intricate planning.

The original plan was to assault the resort used by what they called “the guests”, eliminate their guards (two to three JSDF personnel, according to their sources), then swiftly take their two targets away. The reason why they could not act incautiously in Japan was because their police response times were very fast. In an instant, they could block off roads, set up checkpoints, and lock the entire area down. Therefore, the crucial part of the operation depended on whether or not they could swiftly escape after doing their job. They had mobilized twenty agents for this, and after the enemy camouflaged themselves, they set up in ambush in the forests surrounding the resort, waiting for the enemy to walk into their trap. The CIA men were not familiar with the area, they were in darkness, and they were attacked from multiple sides. On their part, they did not have black fatigues or body armor used for field ops, and their weapons were only pistols and MP5SD3s. Once they came into contact with the Japanese Special Forces, even a skilfully assembled task force would not have been able to do anything.

To think the opposition had such firepower. Somehow, Japan had gotten wind of an attack and had made their preparations. Half of the twenty men lying in ambush had been wiped out in an instant.

In any event, it was just bad luck that their attack ran into the powerful Japanese defense. And this might be the first time the Far East Japan branch had taken so many losses in a single operation. In truth, once they had been ambushed, the operation had failed. If they continued taking losses, even retreat would be difficult. Once Heidegger realized this, he suggested to his team leader that they retreat. However, the team leader, Chuck, shook his head.

He ordered everyone, including Heidegger, to wait for instructions, and then picked up his radio handset.

“Roger! Kim, don’t touch Goldman! Is Tanaka still alive?”

“No, he got one between the eyes.”

“Son of a bitch. Didn’t they say the opposition was just a bunch of bodyguards? This is completely different from the briefing!”

The normally calm and collected Roger could not help but curse and swear at this.

The Japanese did not like guns, and when they opened fire they would aim

for the limbs, and they only used handguns, so they would be easily defeated. Roger and the others had heard the rumors, and their personal experiences confirmed it. However, the actual conditions on the ground were different. Those bastards had not shown a single scrap of mercy as they fired on him and his guys.

“All right, Top’s settled things. After a while, the JSDF will withdraw, and then we’ll proceed as planned.”

The team leader Chuck said this in a tone that suggested that everything had been taken care of, but when Roger heard those words:

“What! As planned? Was losing this many guys part of the plan?!”

“The Japanese defense was stronger than anticipated, but Top’s dealt with that by political means.”

“So why didn’t they do that from the start? That way we wouldn’t have had to sacrifice so many guys for the job!”

“The White House had to burn a valuable card that they were going to use elsewhere because of your incompetence.”

Just as Roger was about to strike Chuck, Heidegger sensed that something was wrong, and hastily interposed himself between the two of them.

“Get a grip, Roger! We’re still on the mission! And Chuck, you’d better

watch your mouth.”

With looks of mutual hatred, the two of them spat and turned away from each other.

“All right, since the problem’s been settled by political negotiations, then let’s make good use of this chance. It should be about time. Peter, Roger, you two are on point. Move out.”

Roger was thinking, ‘*Why are you treating me like this?*’, as he glanced at Heidegger, but after Peter tightened his grip on his weapon and whispered, “Move out”, Roger had no choice but to follow.

Using their trump card meant that Top did not trust anyone on the ground at all. After they stood down from their alert state, they closed the distance to the resort, keeping an eye open in case there were still more guardians within. They sent people to watch the exits and picked the garden for an entry point. They already knew where the target room was from the resort employee they paid off, and with their eyes on their surroundings, the CIA team slowly approached the “Guest’s” room.

Chapter 21

Sometimes, things occurred that seemed like tragedies to the people on the scene but appeared as a comical farce to people watching from a distance. The news of how the Japanese government had invited important guests from the Special Region to discuss future relations with them sent ripples throughout the world's intelligence communities, and they all wanted to be the first to know more. However, the decision to come to Tokyo had been hastily decided, and the guests would only be staying for a brief three days and two nights, so there was no time to learn more about them. The governments of various countries had been given no choice but to plan their next moves based on inadequate information.

When the United States of America heard that Japan had hidden the fact that they had invited guests from the Special Region to their country to form good relationships with them, they were unhappy, to say the least. More precisely, they were jealous.

Perhaps it might be easier to explain the situation this way: Imagine a Japanese boy meeting a pretty girl, and then an American boy — who thinks of himself as the center of his world — also wants to meet the girl as well. However, the Japanese boy keeps the fact that he knew the girl a secret, and responds by playing dumb even when directly asked. However, in matters like these, the first one to make a move was the winner. Even if the American boy could understand and praise the protagonist of Natsume Soseki's "Kokoro", he could not understand the feelings of guilt and frustration in his heart. It was only natural to the American boy — who believed that victory justified everything — that he should kidnap the beauty and take her back to his country. Even if the Japanese government protested, all he would need to

do was reply, “What guests are you talking about?” and the matter would be settled. After all, the Japanese government was also acting on this in secret, so they could not take too harsh a stance. After that, all they would need to do was build a strong relationship with the guests, and then they could do as they pleased. For example, if Japan wanted to build ties with the countries on the other side of the “Gate”, they would have to get through the US first as an intermediary, and beg them for the right of passage. Because of this, even without sufficient intelligence, the CIA brass ordered their Far East Branch to begin the events which led to this farce, and this way of thought was not exclusive to the Americans.

The thing that made it a comedy was that it was not just the Americans who thought they were the center of the world. Other people had also decided to take action the same way they had.

And so, all the men who planned to snatch the “guests” from their beds revealed themselves at once, in front of the bedroom of the sleeping beauties.

There were only 12 people left from the Japanese branch of the People’s Republic of China’s Ministry of State Security. From the Russian Federation, there were only eight of their SVR agents remaining. Nine people remained from the CIA’s task force. And so, the three groups suddenly encountered each other. All of them were involved in illegal activities on foreign soil, so they were all multilingual, and they carried nothing on them which might reveal their national affiliation. Their fatigues were bought from military surplus or survival stores, and they all wore balaclavas. Their weapons were all sourced from different countries. Therefore, even an elite agent would not

be able to tell where they came from at a glance.

However, they were very clear on one thing.

That was to say, the other two groups in front of them were the enemy.

After all, they had just been mown down in a one-sided slaughter with nothing to do but die. They would kill anyone suspicious whom they saw. In the past, the three nations had all gone through similar training exercises. Therefore, everyone but their comrades was an enemy.

“.....!?”

“.....!!”

“.....!”

If an opening appeared, even for just a second, they would take advantage of it and rush in. After staring dumbly at each other for a few seconds, they managed to react at last, and hastily pointed their guns at their enemies. However—

The shutters of a nearby window flew open, and a girl in a black dress landed on a nearby boulder.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming all the way here tonight.”

Their reflexes, honed through long years of intensive training, were thrown into disarray by the girl who stood just a few meters away.

They were aware that there was a young girl among their targets. However, they had not expected that girl to leap out and stand in front of them. Naturally, they would open fire if she tried to get in the way. After all, they were black ops agents. Such ruthlessness was only to be expected. But if they did not pose a threat, then they would try to avoid harming the other party. Therefore, they pointed their muzzles at her on reflex, but they hesitated before pulling the trigger.

As Rory saw this, a smile crossed her face, an expression which suited her nickname of Rory the Reaper. Right after that, a black maelstrom of death raged forth.

“Ufu~”

Something unbelievable had happened. Someone who looked like a delicate young girl was swinging a mighty halberd that gleamed in the light of the moon and the agents’ torches. Then, while her opposition was struggling to make sense of this incredible sight, every swing and every hit she made claimed the life of one of the American, Chinese and Russian agents.

In the space of two breaths, the survivors finally managed to regain control of themselves.

All they could do now was retreat behind cover and return fire. However, all

this did was add to the confusion.

They pointed their silenced weapons at the girl, intending to fill her with their highly lethal 4.6mm and 5.7mm rounds, but the moment the girl sensed their gun barrels pointing at her, she leapt aside gracefully before they could pull the trigger.

They opened fire on the other men of unknown provenance as well.

If any of the agents were hit, they and their comrades would return fire on the shooters. The three-sided firefight began amidst the black Gothic Lolita's storm of carnage.

The black Goth girl floated daintily through the air like a feather, turning and tumbling in mid-air to evade bullets. If she had wings on her back, they would be black.

After landing on all fours like a beast, she moved nimbly, pressing the agents into melee range in an instant, and then cutting them down with her halberd.

Even these elite agents forgot their tactics and training amidst the hail of bullets and the black storm raging around them. It was all they could do to stay alive. To them, everyone except their own countrymen were enemies. They fired wildly, and were shot to death in turn.

The destructive power of the girl's halberd made a mockery of their Aramid-fiber body armor. With every swing, she cleaved a man's body in half.

The agents had never been trained to deal with this sort of unreasonable destructive power. As they thought, “How do we fight someone like this?”, the urge to flee rose within them.

The resort’s yard had a small pool, lanterns and a large boulder, all dotted with plants and trees and illuminated by the silver moonlight. Before they could reflect on the fact that the landscape accurately reflected the wabi-sabi aesthetic, the agents cursed the fact that there were too many blind spots here, and they were not experienced with combat in such cramped quarters.

The black Goth girl made skillful use of this terrain, swinging behind the large boulder to evade a hail of bullets before coming out from the other side to press her attack.

The hanging lanterns were struck with bullets and sailed gracefully into the pool, where the carp floated on the surface, their white bellies up. The vegetation, carefully tended to by the gardeners, was smashed to smithereens in an instant.

Although they had already been reminded that they were not to point their muzzles at the resort under any circumstances, amidst this chaotic battle, several bullets struck home into the building, leaving bullet holes in rainwater pipes on the outside and smashing wine glasses on the inside.

Exchanging fire, concealing themselves, moving when there was an opening, and then shooting again. These people and their valuable techniques were

killed off, one by one.

The American team leader Chuck was hit by a ricochet early on and fell to the ground, but his patriotism and sense of duty would not let him die before he did one last thing for his country. As he watched his comrades fall one by one, he reached for his wireless and softly gasped a report.

“The operation... is a failure. We encountered unexpected resistance and were destroyed.”

“What happened out there? Was it the Japanese?”

“...No... it... it was too chaotic... was the black Goth... girl....”

“What happened? Answer me!”

Deaf to the shouts coming over the wireless, Chuck passed quietly into death.

Heidegger took a hit in his right thigh.

He hid behind a stone lantern and withdrew an elastic bandage from his first aid kit. As he checked his remaining ammunition, Roger, who was taking cover behind the large boulder, took out an enemy trying to circle around him. As he turned back, he saw it.

An indescribable feeling developed in his heart as he saw the merciless slaughter.

“You monster!”

Heidegger saw Roger sent flying before his eyes, and fired at the black Goth Loli girl.

“You monster, you monster!”

But the girl blocked the incoming bullets with the huge blade of her blood-soaked halberd. After he emptied his magazine at her, the gigantic halberd cleaved down.

He narrowly evaded the attack, but he still felt like he had been hit somewhere. Heidegger was now lying in the small pond, and the other enemies looked like they were going to follow up and gun him down.

He raised his MP5 to shoot back, but the magazine was blasted away by the enemy and bullets spilled over the ground. He did not have time to change magazines, so Heidegger reached for his SIG P239 with his left hand. This was when he realized that he no longer had a left arm.

“Cheh...”

He reached for the Makarov in his thigh holster with his right hand. An enemy drew his gun at the same time as he did. He poured his strength into

his intact left leg and launched himself away, away from the bullets of his enemy. The enemy too was retreating, and escaped from under the barrel of his gun.

“Son of a bitch...!”

As the bullets flew through the air, Heidegger reloaded his MP5 with one hand, every bullet that went in filling the weapon with his killing intent. He raised his gun to the air, not caring about anything besides shooting. Then, a fiery heat consumed his chest, his face and his waist, and he collapsed to the ground under the weight of gravity. He wanted to change his magazine, but his hands simply clutched his gun and did not listen to him. The strength was draining from his body, and he thought he could smell the scent of death in the air.

“Son of...a bitch...”

After his vision vanished like a switched-off television, he stopped breathing at last.

As silence returned to the resort’s garden, there was nobody left alive who saw the girl fight.

Rory’s skirt swayed gently in the cold winter wind.

The surviving carp in the pool were thrashing on the surface of the water.

Tuka, who had brought a compound bow to help Rory, breathed a sigh of relief.

Itami, Lelei, Tomita and the others were hiding in the depths of the room. When they saw Rory smiling while covered in blood, standing in the middle of the corpse-strewn garden, they could not help but feel a chill down their spine.

When the incident occurred, the Ichinotani Situation Room could only watch dumbly as the unexpected battle unfolded before their eyes.

“Was it infighting?”

“What the hell just happened!?”

The camouflaged dirigible drone — loaded with third-generation night-vision gear, high-definition cameras and directional microphones — was transmitting data nonstop. Of course, that data included how the three teams that attacked the resort had started shooting at each other.

“Oh my god, what just happened? Can someone tell me?”

Kanou was looking for answers, but there were none for him. After all, nobody could make sense of what had just happened.

In addition, the sight of a young girl swinging around a gigantic halberd only intensified the confusion. After all, it was far too unreal a sight for anyone to

accept.

“Holy shit! That girl’s one of those people who put on a stone mask and suck people’s blood, right?”

These words suited the manga-reading Kanou very well. His extensive experience with manga meant that he could at least rationalize her abilities in his mind.

The battle ended with the deaths of everyone except the girl.

As time went by, the corpses scattered throughout the garden began to cool down. As the residual heat in the bodies drained away, their signatures in the infrared spectrum began weakening, and their bodies slowly disappeared from the eyes of the night-vision cameras.

“In any case, let’s handle it with Case Three.”

One of the officers snapped out of his stupor, his mind restarting as he began giving orders. Case Three involved specialists from the police cleaning up the scene. Because they were working according to plan, they began their tasks without any delays. The specialists started loading the corpses into body bags and recovering the leftover weapons and ammunition (although for some reason, they did not manage to collect all of them), removing the traces of the firefight and taking any wounded or survivors back to their unit to be taken care of. In addition, they asked any witnesses for their help (silence) and so on. Also, they contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other related

parties to ask or hint to them “An incident happened, do you know anything about it?”

Of course, no country would honestly answer that question. Be they Russia, China, Korea, Iran, or France, their embassies would only reply, “We don’t know. It has nothing to do with us. To think a tragedy like this occurred, what a shame.” and similar answers. This time around, they would probably all deny their involvement as well.

The problem was that the Americans answered their question with, “My boss has already discussed things with your boss. What should we do?” Because the Japanese side was still unclear on what was going on, they replied, “Please send someone to take a look at the bodies”. There was no reason to refuse, so they were sure that the request would be accepted. After inspecting and dissecting the bodies, the American Examiner would say “2/3s of the wounds on the body were caused by the Russians and Chinese”. The Japanese coroner would concur as well. They would then classify this incident as an unlucky encounter that turned into a firefight, but that would be a problem for later. The question now was whether they should sever ties with America, or at least, cease all activities against them and deal with the situation neutrally.

As for the resort that became the stage for all of this, the cover-up was fairly easy because they were already cooperating with the government in the first place. After all, this resort was originally run by the Ministry of Defense. Most of its guests were what they called “stakeholders”. The very few exceptions tended to be relatives of JSDF or Ministry of Defense personnel who were lodged here as regular guests. At breakfast time, they asked “What

was all that racket last night?” and the explanation was “There were some military otaku playing survival games in the mountains out back, but they must have something wrong with their heads because they ended up taking things into the garden. The police post sent out some people to arrest them, and after a good scolding, they had to clean up the mess they made. Something like that.”

“Really, they must have no sense at all to play wargames in a place like this.”

“Well, I guess the JSDF are all like that~ I hope my Hiroshi will be fine and won’t be led astray.”

As they spoke with what were probably the middle-aged mothers of their servicemen, the staff who knew what was going on felt the ache of not being able to share what they knew.

Elsewhere, Itami’s group was fleeing.

As the hunting hounds began fighting with each other, Rory had slain them all, but Itami was not nearly naive enough to think the hunters behind them would give up. After they swiftly packed their things, they left the resort before the sun came up.

Tomita mumbled, “Seems like we’re always running into this kind of thing.”

After walking along the streets for some time, they found a bread van that was stopped, but had its engine running.

If it was a getaway vehicle for the people who attacked the resort, one van would probably not be enough. It would not be strange if there were similar vehicles around it. However, there were no other vans within line of sight. In truth, having several vehicles with idling engines clustered together on a rural road would probably arouse the suspicion of the local authorities. Therefore, any vehicles used for escape would need to be spaced out of sight of each other. Itami did not know this, and after realizing that thinking too much about this would be pointless, he decided to take action.

After receiving Itami's signal, Tomita swiftly circled around the van from the blind spot on its right side, staying out of sight of the rear view mirror as he closed in on the foreigner sitting in the driver's seat. He pointed the muzzle of his looted H&K MP7 at the man's head while Itami approached from the front. He smiled politely, and said, "Sorry about that, but would you mind getting out of the van?" as he revealed a looted Makarov pistol. The driver was a big Russian man, and he exited the vehicle with his hands up.

"He's a bad guy so I can shoot him, right? Can I? Can I at least hit him?" Kuribayashi said as she tilted her head up to take in the foreigner who was far taller than her. At the same time, she was holding her looted FN P90 at the ready. The way she spoke suggested that she was still a little drunk.

"In any case, what are we going to do about him?" Tomita said as he forced the man down on the ground. The man realized he was in mortal danger, and

obeyed without a struggle.

“But then how are we going to incapacitate him? We don’t have ropes and we can’t knock people out like in manga. We might kill him by accident. Or we could just give him two in the back of the head, that ought to solve our problems. Want to try it?”

As Kuribayashi said this, she removed the big white man’s handgun which he was storing in a shoulder holster. All the weapons and ammo she revealed in her thorough, head-to-toe search were confiscated, of course.

“Thanks for the extra weapon and ammo. And this is a PDW too. This is some cutting edge stuff. Ah, what a haul, what a haul~”

Kuribayashi’s inability to conserve ammunition was her one flaw as a soldier. With all the ammo she had taken, her baggage probably weighed several times as much as her. Just then, Lelei showed up.

“We just need to incapacitate him and not kill him, right?”

“Do you have something in mind?”

“I do.”

Lelei extended her hand at the back of the man who was lying prone on the ground, and chanted a long verse in mixed tones, like a “one-man chorus”. Strictly speaking, this might be like speaking with one’s diaphragm, except

the sounds she was making were like bird chirps.

After a while, the white man sighed deeply.

“He will sleep like this until morning.”

“That, that’s awesome!”

Kuribayashi’s exclamation seemed to speak for everyone present. They all felt the same way.

The gasps coming from the Japanese who were seeing magic for the first time might have been like the uninitiated watching an illusionist. Lelei, on the other hand simply got onto the van with a totally unconcerned expression, followed by Rory, Piña, Bozes, Risa and Tuka. Tomita was in the driver’s seat, Itami was in the front passenger seat, and the skinny Kuribayashi was squeezed between them. However, the plan to head for Tokyo was aborted by Itami.

“If we charge straight to Ginza like this, we might run into another ambush.”

“Then what should we do? You’ve got a point, but right now the other side of the “Gate” might be safer than this one. I think it would be better to head there as quickly as possible.”

“What a joke, the war zone’s safer than here. This vacation’s a bust, you’d best compensate me for it, Lieutenant.”

Itami raised a fist to answer Kuribayashi.

“Nonsense, I haven’t rested at all either. I need to get leave on December 29 to 31 from Yanagida, no matter what.”

“I don’t know what you plan on doing for those few days, but I’ll take mine some other time.”

“Same here, I don’t want to get pulled into something else by you.”

Kuribayashi and Tomita thought the same way. Lelei translated their dialogue for the others, and then Piña asked a question in a somewhat reserved tone.

“There is something I would like to know. Why must we run around and hide like rats?”

“I’d like to know too, Lieutenant. It’s been weird since the start, what’s going on?”

After hearing their questions, Itami paused to think.

“Actually...”

“Actually?”

“I have no idea.”

“Lieutenant?”

Kuribayashi’s eyes were narrowed into a straight line as she pointed her P90 at Itami. To repeat what was said earlier, the alcohol still had not worn off, and she seemed quite trigger-happy.

“Watch your words, or I’ll put a cap in your ass.”

Itami raised his hands, like he was calming a wild horse, and then gently said, “I’ll explain.”

“You’re just raising your own death flag,” Risa’s voice came from behind.

“Enough nonsense!”

“Please wait, Kuribayashi-dono. You are Itami-dono’s subordinate, right? Please, do not be so unreasonable. I believe this is a political problem.”

Piña interrupted them.

“I understand Itami-dono’s situation. There are some things which cannot be publicly admitted to. Of course, this is just a theory on my part, but I hope you will listen.”

“...”

“Let me verify something before we start. You will not betray us, right?”

Itami shook his head and answered, "Certainly not."

"I believe Bozes and myself should have enjoyed a peaceful vacation with you, correct? However, right from the beginning, all sorts of problems have been taking place, like the sudden change in transportation, the frequent changes in destination, and how we had to dismount that hellish subway thing when we were moments from our destination and so on. Granted, that was largely for the benefit of Rory-dono, so it could not be helped. After the inn we were supposed to reside in caught fire, we took shelter in Risa-dono's home to evade the ones who set the fire. I also believe that was a good decision, However, all these incidents happened in a mere two days, and last night, the resort we were staying in was attacked, forcing us to hurriedly escape. Far too many things have occurred. Our guards have been stripped away and we have been staked before a beastman. Perhaps it has something to do with this country's decision makers. I came to be a mediator between Nihon and the Empire, and the negotiations I will be mediating will probably pertain to peace. Therefore, I realized that in this world, there are forces which desire this peace, and those who do not, and these two forces are currently in conflict. Am I wrong?"

Chapter 22

A highway service area on the outskirts of Tokyo...

It was 5 AM, and most people were still sleeping. However, a truck was racing toward the city.

The service area's parking lots were nearly empty of people, but filled with morning mist.

The sounds of three girls' footsteps carried over the mist. They watched carefully for cars as they jogged out.

One of them looked like she was 12 or 13. She was a jet-black demigod.

The other seemed 14 or 15. She was a wise wizard.

The last appeared to be 16 or 17. She was a Wood Elf.

Itami sat in the front passenger seat of the van and watched them as he thought. Could he have imagined that there would be such beautiful girls in the world?

Risa, in the back seat, asked Itami a question.

“So, which of those three do you like best?”

Itami pretended he had not heard and kept silent. However, Risa continued talking to force an answer out of him.

“By looks, it should be the Elf girl.”

“Ah...”

“For personality, it should be the black Goth girl.”

“Mm...”

“And the silver-haired girl makes you want to protect her.”

As Itami heard this, he mused that Risa probably knew him better than any other woman in the world.

“You really understand me, huh.”

“How long do you think I’ve been with you, anyway?”

Risa kicked at the back of Itami’s seat while she banged away on her laptop’s keys.

The laptop was currently connected to a mobile network.

Tomita and Kuribayashi shrugged as they heard the exchange of the couple in the bread truck. Tomita rubbed his shoulders, sore from a night of driving from Izu, Hakone to Tokyo.

The three girls got back in after opening the van's sliding door.

“?”

“Owie,” Itami said as he grabbed his head. Rory looked scornfully at him, thinking that he must have said something stupid to be bonked on the head by Risa.

Rory and the others were holding cans of amazake, red bean soup with mochi, potato stew, cocoa and other strange and wondrous things, and they distributed them to everyone except Itami. This was the first time they had encountered vending machines, so they cheerfully helped themselves. However, they probably did not know what they had bought.

“What about me?”

Itami said that, but it must have been lonely to be the only one to receive anything. Itami asked Rory, but she ignored him and headed to the back of the bread truck. She seemed to be sulking about something.

“Ah well, forget about it, then. I didn't want to drink red bean soup anyway,” Itami muttered as he sagged his shoulders. This must be what psychologists called “sour grapes”.

“What did you do now?”

“Beats me. I didn't do anything.”

In relationships between men and women, one could do nothing and still be blamed for it. Risa realised this through her woman's instinct and decided to change the topic, in order to ward off the unhappy feelings boiling in her heart.

“All right, the bait's in place. Now all we have to do is wait.”

“What?”

Rory was looking at Risa's laptop's LCD screen from over her shoulder, but there were no pictures. All she saw was words, so she got sick of it quickly. Tuka was sleeping. Lelei was looking in awe at Risa, who was easily using the notebook computer she had bought.

“At 1400 today, Rory Mercury, Tuka Luna Marceau and Lelei La Lelena will offer flowers to the plaque for the victims of the Ginza Incident, and then they will return to the Special Region.”

This information was posted on a certain famous message board. In response, the net exploded with worship for them.

“How about that? You think it'll work?”

Itami turned to look behind the front passenger seat's headrest, at the LCD screen, while slurping cup noodles from a supermarket. The noise combined with the spraying soup made Risa frown.

“It’s good. A whole bunch of people will gather to see them... hey, stop it. Don’t eat ramen on top of a person’s head.”

Risa continued her work.

“Judging by the online reaction to the National Diet telecast, it should be fine. We should be able to gather about a thousand people or more, like the “live guerrilla performances” of famous rock bands.”

In order to protect themselves from their enemies in Ginza, Risa suggested that they should mobilize a huge gang of “big friends”, in order to protect them as they returned to the “Gate”. The Americans, Chinese and Russian could not use extreme methods under the observation of a large crowd. Of course, there was still the chance they might be shot at in the middle of the street, but it was safer than trying to dodge assassins by themselves.

Of course, after seeing this plan, Itami gave it two thumbs up.

“In any case, I need to keep going before the sun comes up. Sempai, you should sleep for now.”

After hearing Risa, Itami obeyed. He leaned his weight back on the back of the chair and fell asleep, like Piña and the others.

“...Also, sempai?

Risa was talking as she was banging away at the keyboard.

“What’s up?”

“You should probably go visit your mother soon.”

“.....”

Itami’s silence was an ironclad refusal, and Risa’s body froze up. Then, he quietly said, “Now’s not good,” suggesting he did not want to talk about this any further.

Piña’s eyes were closed, but she still heard what passed between Itami and Risa.

The two of them were supposed to be divorced, but they sounded like they were still getting along pretty well. Of course, Piña could not understand what they were talking about, but because she could not understand the content, she studied their voices and tone and came to that conclusion. Perhaps he was particularly sensitive about her. That said, it was still quite troubling that she could not understand their words. For all she knew, they might be discussing something important which could determine the fate of the Empire and herself. With that in mind, Piña willed herself to learn Japanese by any means necessary.

Of particular note were the forces on this side of the “Gate” which did not

wish the peace talks to take place. Piña was especially cautious about them. According to Itami, the top three strongest nations in this world were America, Russia and China in that order. She became angry because the Empire's fate would be decided by the three of them fighting with each other. At the very least, she hoped that she could cooperate with the peace-loving factions, and ensure the Empire's survival through diplomacy, because there was no way they could beat them in terms of military power. Even if she could not defeat her opponent, however, she had no intention of simply letting the heavens decide her fate. As a member of the royal family, she was forbidden from doing so.

Letting the heavens decide was a foolish move, because the heavens would bring both good and bad things.

The nobility of the Empire could only rely on their personal strength in the end. Because of that, she needed to understand what was happening on this side of the "Gate". Japan's situation was obvious enough, but she also needed to understand what was going on in the countries called America, Russia and China. She could not do these things by herself. After returning to Italica, she would have to rely on Hamilton, Panache, Nicolatica, Suisses, and the other members of her knight band to help her. After returning to the Empire, she would have to report to the Emperor. Then there was the matter of persuading the Senate.

She had recovered a "gun" from the resort. She had concealed it about her without letting Itami know, and after confirming the feeling she got from it, she knew that she had to bring it back to the Empire in one piece, no matter the cost. There was also the matter of the "art" she saw here, and Piña quietly

gathered her determination.

Today, the TVs were showing a special news bulletin. The morning papers used a whole page of their respective publications to write about how the Prime Minister was suddenly rushed to a hospital and had announced his resignation. Vast numbers of camera crews encircled the Tokyojoshi Medical University Hospital building, along with many reporters and broadcasters holding their microphones and narrating the events with shocked looks on their faces to the entire nation. The opposition parties slammed the ex-PM for “abandoning his duty”, even twisting his name into a pun to that effect. Thanks to this news, a group of people who did not want to be exposed in front of others made their move. The first to discover this was an interviewer for the daytime program “Osomatsu-sama deshita!!”

Their three-man team was comprised of the usual cameraman, boom operator, and female interviewer. They went around asking people on the street for their reactions to the PM’s hospital stay and his subsequent resignation. However, the responses from the people on the streets of Ginza were all the same. Most people would stiffen up and give excessively formal answers when under the camera. In other words, they all replied, “Really? Why the hurry?” with shocked expressions. Those who were critical of the current administration went “Well, resigning was expected, right?” and “How irresponsible” over and over again. Just like the typical reaction to weird news, they would say: “That guy? I thought he would do something like that sooner or later.” They were template responses one would expect when

gathering reactions to scandals like this.

They would use up to ten... no, up to a hundred clips at a time. The clips would cover all sorts of positive and negative reactions from the people. The editor would go through the expected and unexpected material and present it in a way that left the best impression on the audience. Therefore, the ability of an interviewer to collect useful footage was a measure of their skill.

That said, the rookie interviewer Kuribayashi Nanami did not understand this precept yet. She had thrust her mike into a passing man's face for the umpteenth time, asking his opinion about the PM's hospital stay. Her boilerplate questions got boilerplate answers, which the cameraman dutifully recorded. However, what the producer wanted was not "model answers", but "exciting answers", and so far, she had only collected model answers, or offshoots of those model answers. Naturally, much of the material she gathered was unusable. The cameraman and boom operator were becoming demoralized. The director said, "Bring me back some footage we can use", while the producer said, "Can't you guys work a little harder?" After all, there was a female reporter who started alongside her that was already hosting a regular program.

She resolved to work harder to produce something usable. She considered if there were any flaws in her presentation; the way she spoke, the questions she asked, the way she held the mike... she even wondered if things would go better if she should change clothes to emphasise her big breasts. However, her crew asked if she wanted to be remembered only for her looks, and she decided against it.

She sighed as she looked around for people to approach. Ginza was a busy place, and she should not have been worried about not being able to find anyone to interview. Then, she sensed it. There was something odd about the crowds today.

Ginza was famous for its crowded streets, and most of the time, the crowd would enter through the north, wander through the center, and leave through the south, or move from east to west. However, the flow of people halted in front of her eyes. They were obviously not waiting for a traffic light. Yet there was a horde of men gathered by the side of the road, which was not a good place to wait.

It wasn't just one or two of them who felt this way either. Most of the passers-by felt it was annoying and stopped, as though they were waiting for something.

“Is there something special going on today?”

The boom operator replied, “Haven't heard anything.”

The cameraman calmly turned his camera on the crowd standing by the side of the road and said,

“There's more and more of them.”

One after the other, they stood still. The customers who were supposed to be buying things did their best to squeeze into the group. This situation seemed

very strange indeed.

“Is an idol going to be performing a live guerilla concert?”

“Mr. Cameraman, please keep filming.”

Upon hearing Nanami’s words, the cameraman turned his lens around.

“I got it. Before that, you should contact the people on top, right?”

Nanami, drunk on the idea that she might be getting an exclusive scoop, had forgotten the most basic task of reporting back to her superiors. She hastily whipped out her mobile phone after the cameraman reminded her.

The station chief of the CIA’s Japan branch, Graham Morris, was unhappy about the emergency mobilization of his men. He was waiting for the people codenamed “the guests” outside the JSDF’s Ginza Garrison, which encompassed an area 200 meters on each side and which was sealed off by chain link fences.

There was only one gate into the Ginza Garrison.

In front of that gate, there was a plaque erected in memory of the victims of the Ginza Incident, and until this day, people still kept coming forward to offer flowers to them.

Their mission was to stealthily and swiftly abduct “the guests”, then speed them back to the United States.

The Japanese government should have been taken care of.

They had not expected the Prime Minister to invalidate the cards they held with his resignation. At the very least, the promise not to interfere was still in effect. The ones they had to be wary of were the Chinese and the Russians. The team they sent to Hakone had been wiped out, and according to the report they got from Chuck, it was because they encountered the Chinese and Russians there as well and engaged in a three-sided fire fight. If one looked closely, one could see foreign faces everywhere. They might not have all their agents here, but there were enough to maintain a constant presence. That was what his instincts told him.

Eliminate the Russian and Chinese interference while snatching the guests. It was a difficult operation, but not impossible for them. Any country would have difficulty operating in a busy place like Ginza. However, the numbers in front of them were increasing without end, and he asked one of his subordinates about it.

“Are there any special events scheduled here today?”

“Not that I know of.”

“But the amount of people gathering here is pretty abnormal.”

And so, by the time he realized it, Ginza's streets were overflowing with people.

The Chuo Line, Sobu Line and Yamanote Line had a simultaneous line fault that delayed the trains coming into Shinjuku Station. The sun blazing overhead was hot and bright, so much so that it felt like being stuffed into a box, and the stress it created was rapidly fermenting into a kind of aggression. Because the pedestrian paths in the center could not accommodate all the people, they spilled out onto the roads and blocked the way of the cars.

“It looks like there's thousands of people out there. Maybe over ten thousand?”

Ginza Central Police Station's Traffic Control Chief Iwasaki was receiving a report from a patrolman. The massive jam out there kept the police cars from moving. The officers were proceeding to the scene on foot, but there was a frightening amount of people present. At a glance, it looked like an unplanned demonstration of some sort. The people here filled the sidewalks and spilled out onto the roads. It looked like they were waiting for something.

After seeing the television camera crew, the policemen called out to them.

“What are all these people gathered here for?”

The man the police called out to looked confused and fearful of the policemen, but just then, the cheerful and energetic female reporter answered on his behalf.

“Everyone seems to be gathered here to see the girls from the Special Region.”

Nanami had left the cameraman at the place where he had the best view of the flower offerings, waiting for the chance to take a good shot.

The crews from the other channels could not get into Ginza because of the traffic jam and the sheer volume of humanity in their way. In their place were rows of dozens of video cameras and tripods, which were obviously not there for interviews. They radiated a different kind of heat than Nanami’s cameraman. After the department chief said, “Make sure you get a good interview. If it gets published, I’ll give you the department prize”, Nanami had an energetic look on her face.

“What should we do now?”

Tomita was at the driver’s seat and he was getting worried because the huge crowds caused a traffic jam which left them immobile. Cars could drive to Shinbashi, but they had to stop there. Frustrated drivers honked continuously, and some even started swearing and cursing at each other because of the

horns. The police officers were desperately blowing on their whistles and trying to direct traffic, but because this was a sudden occurrence, they did not have enough people to handle the situation.

“Aw crap. I didn’t expect it to get so big...” Risa said as she grabbed her head.

Her predictions were completely off the mark.

The information about Tuka, Rory and Lelei appearing in Ginza had spread through the Net in an instant. People had gathered from all over Japan to see them, and an initial estimate put their numbers at around 40’000 people. The maximum capacity of the Tokyo Dome was 45’000 people, to put that number into perspective.

“I-Itami-dono. Where did these vast crowds come from?”

“Are, are they planning to fight a war with someone?”

Piña and Bozes had terrified expressions on their faces.

The faces of Lelei, Tuka and Rory were hidden by the flowers they had bought along the way to offer to the dead.

“We can’t move at all like this. What should we do?”

To Tomita’s question, Itami could only reply, “We walk.”

“But, don’t you think it’ll be dangerous if we go on foot?”

“It’ll be fine.”

Rory’s smile from amongst the flowers was her answer.

She held her unwrapped halberd in her right hand, while the left had the flowers she was going to give. Then she opened the van door and got out. Sitting down for a long time had made her body stiff, so she stretched her back with an “Mmmm~”. Then she tucked her halberd under her armpit and asked someone from the crowd, “Teenager A”, a question.

“Where is Gin Zar?”

And so...

After seeing this, Risa said:

“It was like a scene from those epic movies where the heroes could part the seas. The people in front of her simply made a path.”

Note

PM Motoi's name is written 本位, which can also be read as Hon'i, or "neglect".

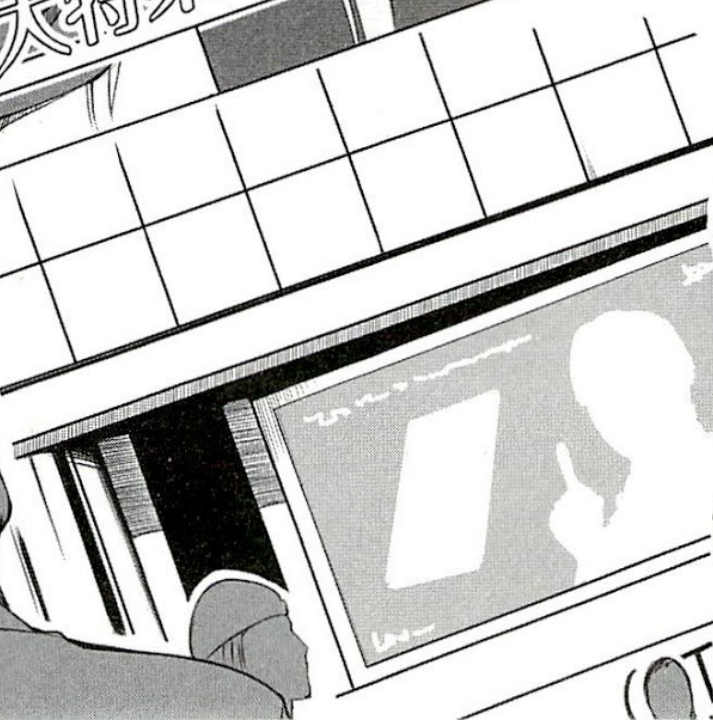
Chapter 23

YOTSUBI

ON



大特集!異世界からの美少女達



COTA

Sadly, there were some people in this world who abandoned reason and allowed their emotion to rule them. For instance, crazed killers running amok. There were also those murderers who hated monks so much that they even hated their cassocks as well. There were those who would even turn their blades on their targets' family members.

They would also turn their emotions on the wrong targets. Sometimes they would go after people who were completely unrelated. In the case where their hatred transferred to the perpetrator's family, the sins of the fathers would be passed on to their sons, as in how debts would be left to them or their relatives to pay, in the barbaric Roman way. However, those were how civilizations from 2000 years ago did things, because they were not as spiritually mature as people now.

However, to the victims of the Ginza Incident, Rory, Lelei and Tuka, as guests from the Special Region, were in a sense the first citizens of an enemy nation they had seen.

They were buried in the huge crowd thronging Ginza, and there was no guarantee that the people here would not transfer their anger onto them. As a result, Itami relaxed the stern look on his face and spoke despondently to Kuribayashi and Tomita.

“Let's forget it for today. We'll spend the night at Risa's place.”

The two of them sagged. However, it was only expected that Itami — who ran away from things he did not like — would say something like that. However, Kuribayashi replied:

“But if we wait until tomorrow, we might be ambushed by agents from somewhere, and when the time comes, we’ll have to force our way through as well, right?”

The original plan was to protect Piña and Bozes from the Americans using the crowd Risa gathered. If they ran away now, her hard work would be wasted.

“Ahhh, we run and they chase us over and over again, they’re like debt collectors or something.”

Ichinotani nixed the idea of hiding in a military camp. If the government protected them, then when the American President called, they would not be able to escape. Prime Minister Motoi had resigned for that as well. Because their movements were not under government control, they could say, “They ran off, so sorry”, and then stick their tongues out at them in their hearts. His Excellency Tarou had laid the situation out to Itami, and he understood.

“Ahh, what a pain...”

Itami squeezed his eyes shut and grabbed his hair, then he sighed deeply before turning to Kuribayashi and Tomita and giving them an order.

If anyone tried to harm the girls, Tomita and Kuribayashi would shoot them. This was not “permission granted”; this was an “order”. Tomita and Kuribayashi had volunteered to join the JSDF, and as career soldiers with the

rank of sergeants, they had been highly trained. In addition, they were veterans of actual combat. Once they heard the command phrased as on “order”, it flipped a switch in their minds which turned them into killing machines. Following that, the two of them inspected the magazines of their looted weapons, and they stuffed more spare magazines into their waist pouches or pants pockets. Of course, they would not openly carry their weapons and frighten the people around them. Instead, they tucked their weapons into their coats, but with the safeties off so they could shoot at any time. Surrounded by the huge crowd around them, they got off the bread van and set feet onto Ginza’s pavement.

Kuribayashi Shino wore a black leather jumper.

Under that, she wore a stone-washed denim mini-skirt over a pair of stockings. Her feet were encased by a pair of heeled boots. Perhaps the heels were because she had a complex about being short? As her nickname of “titty monster midget” suggested, she was a petite woman, but unlike the long bodies and short limbs of real midgets, her muscled body and slender limbs were proportionately scaled. That was to say, she gave the impression of a woman who had been shrunk down with the exception of her breasts.

The front of the jacket was open, exposing a white sweater.

If she were drawn in a standing pose, one would be able to see her left hand pressing down the left hem of her jumper, while her right hand was thrust inside it. If that depiction was in full color, one would be able to see the red lipstick on her lips and her clearly defined eyebrows, in addition to the cool

expression on her face. Naturally, her right hand was gripping a German-made Heckler & Koch MP7. Because of her natural big breasts, even after concealing the SMG's 34cm length inside her coat, the way her bosom pushed the material out allowed people from certain angles to see what she was carrying inside.

She stood like this in the frigid winter wind, her mind on alert, which made people think that she looked really cool.

Beside her was Tomita. He wore a half-coat of cashmere wool. The tall and masculine Tomita was well-muscled, but not to the point of looking clumsy. His body resembled that of a nimble athlete. His skin was tanned, his face was stern, and his chin was shaven, so he looked fierce at a first glance. He watched his surroundings like a hawk.

He had a Belgian-made PDW under his arm, the FN P90.

The last was Itami. At a glance, he looked like a salaryman in his 30s. He wore a wrinkled suit, and a pair of cheap 2000 yen leather shoes (made of synthetic leather), and the grime on them was evident at a glance. He wore a dull longcoat, the same kind you might see in Shinjuku bars. If he stood in traffic during the peak hours, he would vanish into the crowds in an instant, and picking him out from everyone else would be very difficult. He had a Makarov handgun under his suit coat.

And so, the three of them shifted into battle mode in an instant. Risa gasped in surprise behind them. Until just now, they had been relaxed, but now there

seemed to be a blazing aura around them, and there was an air around them as sharp as a bared katana. This was different from the air of intimidation that the yakuza or punks had around them; it was more like a carnivore awaiting its prey, which unsettled and discomfited people. However, Itami only stayed like this for a few moments. In an instant, he returned to his usual easygoing self.

“Sorry, Risa. We can’t take you along for the rest.”

Risa shrugged at Itami, who had stuck his head in from the outside of the van.

“Can’t be helped, right? What should I do about this van?”

“Find a place and abandon it. And don’t forget to return me the money I lent you.”

“If, if my doujin sells, the income should be enough for that. When are you coming back again?”

“Beats me. Not for the time being, at least. I’ll let you know when I can make it.”

Just as Itami was about to turn away, Risa called out to him and he froze.

“S-sempai, even if you say you’ll come back, sometimes you don’t. So, would you let me wait for you here?”

“If you have to say this sort of thing, why did you even leave me in the first place?”

“Because, because I felt bad about marrying you as a meal ticket. I felt that I was no good as a human being.”

Itami fell silent for a moment before replying, “Do as you like”. This time he was really gone.

“And so, Prime Minister Motoi’s sudden hospital visit and the announcement that he was going to resign took the world by surprise.”

The room had a giant image of Prime Minister Motoi as its background, and famous people the world over were commenting on it.

A bearded university professor said unhappily, “That was far too irresponsible.”

A female author replied in his defense, “The Prime Minister’s job is taxing; it’s only natural that he might end up having health problems as a result.”

“The opposition party’s been hounding him about his cabinet’s dirty laundry for days now, but now that he actually resigned, they don’t have anything to say.”

The man with a nameplate saying “Former Governor”, who was now a political commentator, briefed the Diet on the situation.

“Nah, the opposition won’t be discouraged. Once the next Prime Minister takes charge, they’ll just poll for the dissolution of the House of Representatives and then re-elect everyone.”

“I think the topic of discussion now is who will be the next Prime Minister. Nagata-chou of the incumbent party is already moving fast.”

After reporting the commentators’ remarks, the presenter went on to the next topic, which was the candidates to be the next Prime Minister.

“The incumbents have nominated three candidates, Morita-shi, Kanou-shi and Aramaki-shi.”

The huge pictures of the three men appeared on the display.

“Morita-shi has a strong support base and is viewed as the No.1 candidate. Kanou-shi is popular with the people, but he does not have much support within the party. It is not known whether the next party leader will be decided through internal agreement or through an election. Stay tuned, gentle viewers!”

After the political topic was concluded, the presenter’s face seemed to change as he moved on.

“The Ginza Incident”

It was followed by commercials.

After about four 60-second commercials (about washing liquid, car insurance, and super-thin, super-fragrant diapers), the next segment featured the people who had been summoned before the National Diet.

What the viewers saw was Tuka, the Elf with the flowing golden hair, standing on a red carpet and bathed in the light of countless flashbulbs, radiating an ethereal beauty. She looked like a model for shampoo and conditioner.

Then there was Lelei, with her silver hair and calm eyes.

After her was Rory, in her black Goth Loli outfit, with her sharp tongue and playful expression.

“The three guests from the Special Region were warmly welcomed by the people. As someone who was formerly believed to only exist in people’s imaginations, Tuka Luna Marceau is the most popular among them.

A commentator said, “She’s very beautiful, isn’t she? Don’t you think she’d stir the otaku imagination? Since they were only thought to exist in fantasy until now, anyone would want to meet a real live elf.”

“I watched the Diet live telecast too, it really surprised me. That girl’s called

Lelei-san, right? In just a few months, she's mastered Japanese to this extent. And I thought Tuka-san's ears were some sort of prop too," a young female entertainment lawyer said.

"Speaking of their ages, what's up with that? No, I know it's embarrassing to ask a lady's age. Maybe the years in the Special Region are very short?" a female author asked. She seemed quite concerned about that issue.

"According to reports from the Ministry of Defense, a year in the Special Region is roughly 389.3 days long, and every day is shorter than ours, so it all equals out in the end."

"But Rory Mercury-san said she was over 900 years old. Yet she looks like a middle-schooler."

The obsessed female author went on about it.

"Also, Tuka-san is supposed to be 160 years old, doesn't she look too young?"

The truly obsessed female author continued.

A book once wrote that a properly educated woman would not be jealous of anything. For instance, they would not be overly sensitive about looks and wealth. However, when a 50-year old woman saw another woman who was far older than her, yet looked like she was in her teens, it would be difficult not to have mixed feelings about her.

“They already said at the Diet that the two of them are from long-lived species.”

“How about their men? They look young, but they’re over a hundred years old.”

“In truth, it does seem kind of unreal,” the bearded professor said.

“I won’t say they used makeup or cosmetic surgery to look young. I’d thought of it before, but given the faces they showed to the audience, I don’t think anyone would mind if they were over a hundred or over 500 years old,” the young entertainment lawyer replied.

“The girls who raised such a stir are now here today to offer flowers to the Ginza Incident memorial plaque, and after that they will return to the Special Region. A truly staggering number of fans have come to Ginza today to catch a glimpse of them.”

The presenter changed scenes, showing a close-up of people thronging the streets until they spilled out onto the roads.

Traffic was completely paralyzed, with massive jams everywhere. The police were struggling to control the crowds, trying to herd them with police whistles. Then, the presenter’s face appeared on the screen.

“What you’re seeing now is Ginza at one in the afternoon. Fans from all over

the country have gathered in force. We'll go over to our interviewer who's on the ground right now. Nanami-san~”

The image shifted from the studio to a live telecast.

Because this was a nation-wide broadcast, Kuribayashi Nanami was frantically practicing her lines and ignoring her surroundings. She had written the word “man” on her palm, and trying her best to make a good smile. Behind her, one could see people thronging the memorial plaque.

“Kuribayashi-san~

After that, without any prearrangement at all, the crowd automatically parted, opening a clear path that led to the altar where the flowers would be offered, under the plaque. Along this path walked the black Goth girl, the long-haired elf, and the silver-haired girl, all carrying bouquets of flowers, followed by a woman with a head of vibrant red hair and another woman with golden drill hair, and behind them were a Japanese male and female who looked like their bodyguards. There were seven of them in total.

“Is the sound working, Kuribayashi-san!”

In truth, Itami was present too, but his sheer lack of presence meant that he was eclipsed by the three girls who were the stars of this show.

In that sense, one could say that he was a failure as a main character.

“Kuribayashi-san~”

After she realised someone was calling out to her, Kuribayashi hurriedly put on her earpiece.

“Ah, this, this is live from Ginza.”

“Right now, what’s going on in this image?”

“Ah, yes. We’re on the scene right now. Currently, the three girls are approaching the flower altar, while the crowd is cheering and waving to them. The fans have filled up the roads and sidewalks and jammed up traffic for blocks around, but they’re especially polite to the girls. Nobody arranged it, but it seems the crowd has parted for them.”

A youth suddenly dashed out of the wall of people. Before Tomita could body-check him, Rory raised her halberd and thumped it down into the ground, creating a ringing sound like a shakujo. Coupled with her bewitching smile, the youth fell flat on his butt, and then he scrambled back into the crowd.

“We can only see three people in that image, are there any more?”

“Yes, there are seven in total.”

“Are the other four from the Special Region as well?”

“I don’t think so, they look like... like... nee-san?!”

“Hah? Kuribayashi-san?”

“Sor-sorry. I don’t know why, but my big sister is there.”

“Is that Kuribayashi-san’s big sister?”

“Yes, my big sister works in the JSDF, she should be in the Special Region, I never heard anything about her coming back. Nee-san, what are you doing?!”

“Hm, it’s Nanami-chan, what are *you* doing here?”

The older Kuribayashi sister replied nonchalantly to her little sister from the road. That said, she was still watching her surroundings at maximum alertness. They had to work extra hard because they were not professional SPs.

“I’m doing a TV broadcast.”

“No way, you mean it’s live?”

“Well, it’s just a webcast-”

“Yaho~ Mom, are you well?” In this instant, the camera turned to her.

Because of this, everyone in the nation saw a glimpse of her carrying a H&K MP7 with her right hand in the middle of Ginza. Assuming she was still thinking straight, the only reason why she would expose herself like that was because 70% of her attention was being spent on looking out for danger. Under Kuribayashi, Tomita's and Itami's oversight, Rory and the other people from the Special Region offered their flowers. As they did this, over a hundred flashbulbs went off. After it was done, Rory looked around and quietly said, "Someone should ring a bell for the spirits of the dead." Then she raised her halberd and loudly asked, "Won't someone ring a bell for me?"

And as though in answer to her request, the Ginza Wako Clock Tower began ringing. The way Rory went "Mm, thank you", then smiled and closed her eyes brought a somber air to the place.

The camera paused to film the elder Kuribayashi and the three Special Region guests kneeling before the memorial plaque. After the bells finished ringing, they rose and turned their backs to the plaque, in order to face the crowd. The cameraman quickly shifted to capture their faces, while the boom operator recorded the Kuribayashi sisters' exchange.

"Then, can we interview them?"

The younger Kuribayashi was speaking normally in front of a national audience. But the producer clenched his fist and smiled, "Well done" from his production room. Originally, his opinion of her was so low it could not have gone any lower, so she could only go up from there. His opinion of her now was reflected in the fact that she managed to get an exclusive close-up

with the three girls who were the talk of the nation.

“No way, no way. After they offer their flowers, we’re returning to the Special Region ASAP.”

“Why not? Not even for a while?”

“We were attacked yesterday, you see.”

“Attacked? By who?”

“Americans, I think, or maybe the Chinese or Russians. The train we were on got stopped for some reason, the hotel we were supposed to stay in was burned down by arson, and a whole bunch of things happened, so that’s why today we—”

She was pissed off about the whole thing, and toward the end her words were starting to jumble together. Saying all that was pretty much the same as exposing the whole affair. Besides, anyone who read the papers or watched TV would find that what she said matched up with recent occurrences.

“Yo, Graham.”

Before the unhappy Graham stood a Japanese man.

It was Komakado, from Intelligence Branch. Once, he had seemed like a grim and imposing man, and with his crutch that grim darkness surrounding him only deepened, as though he was radiating an air of discomfort.

“What’s up, Komakado? There’s nothing for you to do here.”

“It’s true, we’ve been ordered not to interfere with your work. However, there are Russian and Chinese agents out there. We can’t ignore them, so we locked onto them.”

“I see...”

As Graham thanked Komakado, he sighed in relief. If this kept up, Japan would be helping them suppress the agents from the Russians and the Chinese.

The CIA’s plan was to create a panic and cut the TV broadcast, then take advantage of the confusion to have their teams abduct the guests. It was a difficult plan to execute.

“Speaking of which, Graham, how do you CIA people tell Russian and Chinese agents apart? Could you teach me? I’d like to know how.”

“What are you saying?”

“Oh, I’m just curious if CIA agents have a way to instantly tell them apart. Russians and Chinese look the same to me...”

As he listened to Komakado say that, Graham worriedly went for his cell phone.

He tried calling all his emplaced subordinates, but there was no response.

“You son of a-!”

“Like I said, I can’t tell the Russians from the Chinese. Sorry about that.”

Komakado smiled as he faded into the crowd, and Graham knew the operation had failed.

Komakado withdrew his mobile phone, and dialled a number from his contact list.

Several seconds later, Komakado spoke.

“Yo, Itami. That was a pretty slick move you pulled.”

“God damn!”

Darryl, the President of the United States, angrily kicked over the wastepaper basket in his office. He had a telephone and display in front of him which currently showed the live telecast from Tokyo’s Ginza district. No CIA agent team, however skilled, could snatch the guests now. The fatal blow was the

mention that “We were attacked by the Americans, Russians and Chinese,” which had been heard by the entire nation. On top of that, the CIA personnel in charge of inciting a panic and disrupting the TV broadcast had been captured by the Japanese, who apparently could not differentiate between the Russians and Chinese.

The command team was intact, so they could try and force the issue, but that would end up being broadcast throughout the nation as well.

Once word of that got out, any hostiles would instantly become a villain. Be they American, Chinese or Russian, anyone who tried to use force now would end up scoring a goal against their own country. He had not expected the Japanese government to be bold and vicious enough to actually try something like this. Without any direct action on their part, they had sealed off the Americans’ ability to act, and they had even exposed the illegal activities of the Americans, Russians and Chinese, which would only lead to censure and difficulty for them.

For instance, the White House could say to the Japanese government “Don’t say such meaningless nonsense” with reference to that servicewoman, as could the Kremlin, or Zhongnanhai. The Japanese would probably release an official statement along the lines of “The Japanese government knows nothing about any so-called illegal activities conducted by the Americans (or Russians, or Chinese) and end the matter there.

If an accusation like that was made on national television, the Japanese government would have to respond with “Nobody would believe the words

of a mere JSDF trooper”. Even if they tried to press the issue, the Japanese government would reply “She babbled that nonsense while she was drunk and on vacation, right? And her gun was just a toy, the proof is that Japan did not supply her with such a weapon,” and then they would cut off communications.

However, one would not even need to ask to know who the citizens that watched the broadcast would side with. After all, it was a simple conversation between two sisters, which was why it felt realistic to the audience. Darryl thought he saw a phantom Motoi lecturing him from inside the transmitted image.

“If you try and do anything to our guests, you had best prepare yourselves.”

“Shit, shit! Bloody Motoi! That son of a bitch!”

He trampled on the remains of the wastepaper basket, and scattered it even further across the Oval Office’s red carpet.

President Sheganov of the Russian Federation toasted his screen inside the Kremlin with the glass of vodka he was holding. “Not bad, Japanese. Not bad.” Within the depths of Zhongnanhai, Chairman Dong Dechou clicked his tongue, and then ordered his man on the scene to withdraw.

And so, Itami and his companions managed to safely... well, not quite, they

had accumulated a fair bit of mental and emotional fatigue, but they did manage to reach the Ginza side of the Gate.

Before passing through the Gate, they had to submit to an inspection by the sentries, much like an airport. If they were moving a vehicle through, everything in the cargo compartment would have to be opened up and anything hand-carried would also be inspected. After that, the security personnel would take their fingerprints, palmprints, perform a retina scan and measure their pulse rate among other tests. Only after all these tests were completed could they enter the concrete dome which contained the Gate.

But then...

“Did you buy all of these in Tokyo?”

“Is something wrong?”

As Itami responded in a playful way, the commander of the sentry post sighed deeply.

While checking the girls’ luggage, they found Rory’s black Goth clothes along with her punk-style (with spikes and chains) clothes and underwear. Apparently Rory was not interested in normal clothes, but she seemed to like metallic things. After that were a bunch of daily-use items and things like Lelei’s laptop, Tuka’s compound bow, all of which piled up like a miniature mountain. The sentry commander could only close his mouth.

“We have to check all of these, you know.”

However, inspecting feminine-use items would pose all sorts of problems. The female soldiers would handle delicate items like underwear and so on, but if they had to inspect each and every sundry item, they would never get things done. The commander was thinking about whether to just briefly go over the things. Meanwhile, more female personnel conducted body searches of Lelei, Tuka, Rory, Piña, Bozes and Kuribayashi.

And then, with a “What’s this?” they withdrew a pistol that had been very well concealed upon Piña and Bozes’ persons.

“Oya.”

Tomita said.

“Well done.”

He was impressed by the way Kuribayashi had not flinched at all. He smoothly followed up by saying “Oh, it’s for self-protection. We let them carry it just in case”. Then, with a loud thump, a heavy backpack was deposited in front of the commander.

“What’s this?”

The contents of the backpack, when placed on the inspection table, turned out to be a veritable mountain of looted weapons.

“Well, we couldn’t just leave them lying around, could we? We picked them up, but do we need to turn them over to you?”

In truth, the JSDF did not have any procedures for handling looted weapons.

If he tried to follow procedure and impound these weapons, it would create a lot of problems related to the handling and seizure of them. Besides, there was no way unmarked weapons used by illegal nationals and seized by common civilians could be entered into a report.

“So what will you do?”

Because of that, the mere existence of these looted weapons was a pain in the ass. Naturally, a man who was part of an organization would probably not want to subject himself to that sort of bother. After the sentry commander heard Itami’s story about how he got those weapons, he turned aside while saying, “I saw nothing” and “I heard nothing”.

“These guns are your loot. So their responsibility falls to you. In any case, I’ll record these weapons on a black sheet. Our part in this is now settled. How about that?”

Recording them on a black sheet meant that the records would only be revealed if a problem surfaced in the future. Otherwise, those records would not exist on any official documentation. Under certain conditions, these black sheets might be shredded by orders from the brass.

And so, the looted weapons and ammunition ended up going into the stores of 3rd Recon.

Lelei, Rory and Tuka were seated in the back of Tomita's HMMV. They were headed back to the refugee camp at the foot of Arnus Hill.

Since they had brought back a lot of souvenirs with them, Itami was helping to sort them out.

"Japan was a fun place," Rory said.

"It was very exciting. I hope to be able to visit again," Lelei said.

"Shopping was fun," Tuka smiled.

The three of them bade their farewells to Itami before they went their separate ways.

The sky was getting dark, since the sun was setting.

Tuka returned to the room she had been given at the prefab housing, and opened the door with a bright, "I'm home!"

"The other side of the Gate was awesome, and we brought back so much stuff," she said as she put her things onto the table in the darkened room. But

she tilted her head because there was no response.

“Hmm? Not there?”

After searching briefly in the room, she sighed and said, “Really, Dad, where have you gone?”

“I look away for just a moment and this is what happens.”

Tuka sorted out the things she bought as she muttered to herself.

Elsewhere, Piña and Bozes were in the room assigned as their quarters. The two of them were enveloped in a grim atmosphere, and they sat silently on their beds.

An intermediary for the Empire and Japan. She now realised just how heavy a burden it truly was.

If this war continued, the Empire would undoubtedly lose. The difference in civilization, technology and warfare was far too great to overcome. She had seen it with her own eyes and felt it with her own body.

“Your Highness...”

Bozes called out to her, in an attempt to clear the air.

“Mm. Tomorrow we return to the Capital,” Piña answered.

She would immediately begin the work for the peace talks, in her role as mediator.

She did not know what form those talks would take. If things went wrong, they would end in the Empire's defeat. But if she let the war carry on, the death toll would be around the same as well.

Piña converted her resolve into words.

“I shall end this war.”

Note

1: A shakujo is a buddhist prayer staff.

2: Minister of Defence Kanou Tarou = His Excellency Tarou. Because some people out there will need this pointed out to them.

Afterword

To those readers who have just obtained this volume, or who have started reading it, thank you very much.

I started with the same words as the previous volume because I was sure that there would be some people who would want to start with the second part first. I wanted to put three girls on the cover of this light novel instead of men. Yeah, that should be good. Don't you agree, dear readers?

Speaking of which, if you have any doubts after reading this volume, do read the previous volume after clearing up your doubts. It will be very entertaining for you.

Also, this may seem sudden, but everyone in 3rd Recon were modeled after real people.

Their names have been changed of course, because I could not obtain the original person's permission to use their real names. The following characters' names have not been changed.

Sergeant Major Kuwabara was modeled after one of the Sergeant Majors in my unit. At that time, he was around 50. His legs were much stronger than ours as recruits, and although we could still keep up over short distances, for long distances he left us in the dust. He might be an old gramps now, but those legs of his should still be racing down the streets.

Staff Class Kuribayashi was a combination of two ladies.

The first was a female karateka, and her unarmed combat demonstrations were a thing of beauty. She was also as adorable as a kitten. Although her body was a lethal weapon, she was a very nice person. Her personality was taken from the other person.

The second person was a race car driver. After she got involved in an accident and was hurt all over her body, not only did she not learn from her experience, but she kept taking part in car races. Every time we met she would ask, “Have you graduated from otakudom?” I learned to keep quiet because she would drown me in backtalk if I dared to say anything. I think anybody who would marry someone with that personality must be a true hero.

Kurokawa’s inspiration was sometimes called a nurse, but in truth she was a nutritionist. There was also a legend that when she walked into the cafeteria with her pretty face and her flowing long hair, all the noisy people in the cafeteria would immediately fall silent. As long as she was there, everyone would be smiling tensely. The biggest mystery was her hair, or to be more precise, it’s length. After all, servicewomen had to cut their hair short upon enlistment.

The novel “Gate” has its cast showing their personalities and acting against

the backdrop of a fantasy world. I would be happy if this story entertains its readers.

Yanai Takumi